10

大富豪の箱!!

健速
Takehaya

健速 たけはや

「あの日々をもういちど」（HJ文庫）で作家デビュー。
こたつをしまった途端、クーラーのスイッチを入れるかどうかで迷う。

ポコ

兵庫県出身のイラストレーター。
好物はやきそば。最近はUFOそばめしにハマリ中。

カバーイラスト／ポコ 装丁／渡辺宏一

た03-02-12

健速

六畳間の侵略者!? 10

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HOBBY JAPAN

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古代フォルトーゼでの戦いから幾年、孝太郎とクランがたどり着いたのは、10年前＝1999年の地球だった。二人はそこで、巫女服姿の幼子と出会う。自らを“キィ”と名乗るその聡明な少女は、「青い星」＝母親を捜し、「カブトンガー」の映画を見るために家出をしてきたと言うが――時を越えた孝太郎、その語られざる足跡が今、新たな運命を紡ぎだす！

HOBBY JAPAN

たどり着いたのは、1999年の地球
それは孝太郎の母の命が失われた年――

【揺り籠】を隠すため
降り立った森で出会った少女。
おほしさまを探しているという
その娘は〝キィ〟と名乗った。

その少女の願いを
叶えるため動く
孝太郎の前に、
次々と現れる
謎めいた少女たち……

そして否応なく戦いへと巻き込まれる孝太郎。
果たして彼は少女の、自らの〝願い〟を
叶えることが出来るのか!?

六畳間の侵略者!?
キャラクター勢力図

魔法少女

藍華真希（あいかまき）
ゆりかの敵、
悪の魔法少女【ダークネイビィ】。

虹野ゆりか（にじの）
自称“魔法少女”。一◎六号室に
危機が迫っていると主張する。

幽霊

東本願早苗（ひがしほんがんさなえ）
ころな荘一◎六号室に取り憑く
幽霊少女。

宇宙人

ティアミリス・グレ・
フォルトーゼ
皇位継承の試練のため、
一◎六号室とその住人の支配を狙う。

クラリオーサ・
ダオラ・
フォルトーゼ
ティアの家と敵対している
宇宙人皇女。

ルースカニア・
ナイ・
パルドムシーハ
ティアの付き人で世話係。

一般人

笠置静香（かさぎしずか）
孝太郎の同級性で
ころな荘の大家さん。

松平賢治（まつだいらけんじ）
孝太郎の幼なじみで親友。

ころな荘の住人

里見孝太郎（さとみこうたろう）
ころな荘一◎六号室の、
いちおうの借主で主人公。

桜庭晴海（さくらばはるみ）
孝太郎の所属する編み物部の部長で、
一年先輩。ちょっと病弱。

地底人

クラノ＝キリハ
一◎六号室を足がかりに、地上侵略を狙う?

もくじ

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Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Part 1

A mother's death held unfathomable meaning for a young girl who was just barely six years old.

At this age, children are always with their mother, whether they're playing, eating, or sleeping. Even when they're leaving and coming back from kindergarten, they are always by their mother's side. That is as obvious as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.

“Dad, you meanie! Can't you just listen a little!?”

Of course, the same was true for this young girl. Just after she had turned six, her mother passed away from a sickness. It was as if the sun had stopped rising all of a sudden. Having become mentally unstable, the girl would fight with her father over even the smallest things.

“I will definitely go watch the Kabutonga movie.”

The reason for this fight was the theatrical version of the currently airing TV-series: The King of Beetles, Kabutonga. The anime that starred heroes with beetles as motifs was incredibly popular with the kids. The same was true in her hometown, and when children spoke, it was mostly about Kabutonga. This girl was also a big fan of Kabutonga, and she eagerly awaited each week for a new episode.

“I don't care if I can't go to the surface.”

And as the series was about to end, a theatrical version was being made. After several months, it was finally released around the nation. However, the girl's hometown didn't have a movie theater. Wanting to see the movie, the girl begged her father, but in the end he had refused.

For a six year old, the girl was very smart and gentle. Her wanting to go see the Kabutonga movie was a rare display of selfishness. However, based on her situation, this might not even be called that. Having lost her mother, the girl sought for more love from her father, and what she really wanted was not to go see the Kabutonga movie, but to go with her father.

“Kii-chan is leaving and won't come back! I will live on the surface! I hate you, dad!”

The father hadn't completely recovered from the shock of losing his wife either, and as a result he hadn’t realized what his daughter really wanted, even though they both wished for the same thing.

As such the girl, Kii, ran away from home.

Kii ran away from the town she was born in and headed towards Kitsushouharukaze city. Since this was before the city merged with Kitsushou city, it was actually still called Harukaze city. In that city was a movie theater, and Kii was planning on watching Kabutonga there.

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Part 2

Upon arriving at Harukaze city, Kii was left breathless by the sight in front of her.

“Wow…”

There were several routes connecting Kii's hometown and Harukaze city. The route she had used was a tunnel that exited halfway up a smaller mountain.

After jumping out from the dimly lit tunnel, Harukaze city being dyed orange appeared in front of her eyes. It was currently evening and the sun was just starting to set, throwing its orange light at the city. The city was normally lit up by all kinds of colors, but now it was all dyed in a calming orange. That profile is only natural for us, but to Kii, it was exceptionally beautiful.

“So the surface was this beautiful…”

Kii's large eyes were sparkling as she innocently looked around her. She saw the city lit up by the orange sun in front of her, around her she saw the trees of a forest and above her was a wide sky. Kii had seen these in pictures and videos, but this was the first time she saw it with her own eyes.

“Everyone should just live up here…”

Just a while ago, Kii couldn't understand the feelings of those who wanted to leave her hometown. But after taking a look for herself, she began to understand. The magnificent sight in front of her and smell of nature stimulated something deep inside her. It was a strange sensation; even though she had left her hometown, she felt like she had just returned home.

“Ah…”

As Kii looked around for a while, the sky began turning darker and a point of light appeared in the sky.

“Could that be a star!?”

Kii had found the first star of the night.

The small point of light in the sky was the twinkle of a star.

That was when she remembered something she had been told by her recently passed away mother. She opened her eyes wide and began looking for other stars. According to her mother, after the first star appeared, many more would follow.

“It's just like mom said! There are so many stars!”

Since it had just turned evening, there was only one bright star, but upon closer inspection she could see many more. There were more weak-glowing stars than she could count using her hands. And each time Kii found a new star, she would let out a pleased sound.

“Amazing! There are stars all over!”

As time passed, the sky darkened even more, and the light from the stars grew stronger. Even the weak glowing stars she had seen at first were now as bright as the first star. Like a box of jewels, the sky twinkled with the light of the stars.

“With this many, I might be able to find mom's star!”

That was the reason why Kii was counting the stars in the sky.

“Kii-chan, don't cry, even if I die. When people die, they become twinkling stars in the sky…”

“Stars?”

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

“That's right… so if you were to go to the surface, then look for my star. It will be a glowing blue star, so I'm sure you'll find it right away.”

“Okay! Kii will find it!”

Her late mother had become a star. That was what the young girl believed. And so she counted the stars in the sky, searching for her mother's star.

Kii hadn't run away just to go watch the Kabutonga movie. She had also done so to find her mother's star. However, either way, the reason for it all was that she had lost her mother. In the end, both her wanting to watch the movie and counting stars was a sign of deficit of love.

“Ah!? It's a blue star!”

When the sky completely darkened a bright blue star appeared.

“It's mom! It's mom's star!”

It was the blue star that she had been looking for all this time. Upon finding it, Kii expressed her joy using her entire body. She reached out towards the star with both her hands and jumped in place several times.

“Mom! It's Kii! Kii is right here!”

Her expression turned bright and she was filled with joy at having been reunited with her mother as she called out repeatedly. Kii wanted to meet her mother once more, she wanted to hear her name called out in that nostalgic and warm voice.

“Mom! Answer me, mom!”

But no matter how many times Kii called, the star didn’t respond. The star simply twinkled in the sky, not responding to Kii.

“Mom…”

Eventually, Kii's voice faltered and her shoulders dropped.

“Is that star… not mom's star…? Or can she not hear Kii's voice…?”

The blue star showed no reaction despite Kii's calls, and that made her feel unbearably lonely. Eventually the sadness she had felt when her mother passed away revived and she began tearing up.

“Mom… mom…”

Large tears formed in the corners of her eyes, and even a slight shake would send tears running down her cheeks. With her eyes full of tears, Kii looked up into the sky once more. She couldn't give up. Kii touched the necklace around her neck and called out to the star again.

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

“Mom… it's Kii… I came to see you…”

But the star still didn't answer. It simply quietly twinkled in the sky.

“Uhhh…”

Kii finally began crying as the star remained silent.

The sadness of having lost her mother, the irritation of not being doted on by her father and the loneliness she felt as the star remained silent.

This reality was far too harsh for a six year old girl to accept.

“Uuuhhh… ah…?”

Kii blinked twice. Tears fell from her eyes and her sight cleared up a little.

“Mom's star is getting bigger…?”

The blue star that the girl had found was at first just a glowing point. However, it was now clearly different as it glowed even brighter. Seeing that, Kii believed the star had gotten bigger.

“Did she hear Kii's voice?”

Kii's tears stopped as she realized that something had happened. She didn't know what, but she thought that her mother had responded to her calls and her heart started racing.

“Mom! Kii is right here!”

Kii waved her hands and desperately called out to the growing star.

“It really is getting bigger… mom!”

The star was now as big as a baseball, and it was still getting bigger. Happy, Kii called out to it even more.

That was when Kii heard an unfamiliar sound similar to a beast roaring or like the sound of a car driving through a tunnel.

“…What is that…?”

She looked up towards the sky and strained her ears. By doing that, Kii felt like the sound was coming from the star.

“The star is… growling?”

Kii reached the conclusion that the star was emitting the sound.

As the star had grown to the size of a baseball it passed by above her.

“Where!?”

Kii hurriedly turned around to look at the star. She saw the star disappearing in the shadow of the mountain.

“The star fell!”

The star had gotten bigger because it was getting closer, and the sound she heard was because it was moving so fast.

That was the conclusion the clever six year old girl had reached and she hurriedly began climbing the mountain.

“Mom! Mom noticed Kii and came to meet me!”

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Kii ran with all of her might, chasing after the fallen blue star. Her heart was pounding and she had lost her breath. But even then she wouldn't slow down. She simply continued running at that speed.

“Mom! Mom! It's Kii! Kii is right here!”

No matter how painful it got, Kii wouldn't stop moving her legs.

That was because her mother that she wanted to see more than anything, was supposed to have come down from the sky.

Part 3

Having come to Earth, the first thing Koutarou and Clan did was to hide the spaceship, the Cradle. They were planning on burying it in the forest of a small mountain in the suburbs of Harukaze city.

“Bertorion, this place really won't be under any development, will it?”

“Yeah, it's fine. This mountain will remain untouched. I came here looking for beetles every year so there's no mistaking it.”

“Then that's fine.”

The Cradle slowly sank into the ground as if it was water while Koutarou and Clan watched over it.

Clan's smaller spaceship, the Cradle, had been designed with observation and research work in mind. Because of that, it had all kinds of functions to hide itself in order to not disturb the target of study or its living conditions. That's because it was best to study something secretly. And the Cradle burying itself in the ground was one of the functions for just that. Using a barrier, it created an excavator by repelling the dirt around it as it slowly sank into the ground. Once finished, the only thing that would remain on the surface would be a hatch to enter. Remains of the ground being dug up would remain, but it would eventually be covered by nature.

“So what do we do now?”

“We don't do anything. We just sleep, like we did before leaving Forthorthe.”

At first, Clan had planned to use her second super-space-time repulsion shell to return back to the present from Forthorthe 2,000 years into the past. By reversing some of the parameters, they should be able to return from where and when they came. However, the second repulsion shell had been used in their battle on Forthorthe. She had to think of another way to return.

The solution she came up with was to spend 2,000 years in a place where they would never be found. By adapting the technology used for hyperspace, they would be able to freeze time onboard the Cradle. So as long as they weren't found, they would be able to pass through 2,000 years. And once that time had passed, they would just return to Earth through normal means.

However there was a large problem with that. A part of the Cradle had been damaged and it wasn't capable of spaceflight. The parts required to repair that wouldn't be created until 20 years before present time. Because of that, Koutarou and Clan had woken up once 20 years in the past and repaired the Cradle. Once repairs were complete, they used both normal travel and hyperspace travel to return to Earth.

Without using hyperspace, the closer a ship flew to the speed of light, the slower time would pass. But by using both, it still took them ten years to reach Earth, which to them felt only like a few days.

The reason for why they didn't just use hyperspace was to reduce the amount of time spent frozen on Earth as much as possible. If they only used hyperspace, they would have to spend 20 years frozen. But since Earth didn't have any off limit areas like Forthorthe's “Bertorion's special territory,” it was better to spend as little time frozen as possible. That said, if they were too slow and reached Earth while Theia was there or was on her way, they might be detected. So it was important to find a good balance between the two.

So because of that, there was the need to sleep onboard the Cradle once while on Earth. And so they had chosen a place where Koutarou had gone to play as a child to hide the ship.

“How many years will we sleep now?”

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

“Please wait a little, I'm calculating that right now.”

Clan operated her bracelet and calculated how long they needed to sleep. Clan had a nonchalant look on her face, but there were a lot of parameters that had to be used to calculate how long they needed to sleep. As a result, it started to take some time, and Koutarou began fretting.

“Clan, you could just make a rough estimate.”

“…”

Clan adjusted her glasses and showed a dissatisfied expression. She was only making an accurate calculation because Koutarou had asked, so that irritated her.

“Bertorion, you like to just casually tramp on scientist's efforts and beliefs, don't you?”

“I can only imagine you wasting your time…”

“What do you mean by waste! I'm—”

“It's because you're like this that Theia calls you sly and whatnot, even though you're cute.”

“…”

“Just be more relaxed. You know, more— eh? What's with that strange face?”

“I-It's nothing! Ahem, more importantly, I've finished the calculation!”

Clan cleared her throat as her face turned red and forcibly changed the topic. She then quickly displayed her results on a hologram.

“Sorry, I'm not wearing the armor so I can't read it. I might be able to understand it if you use ancient Forthorthe.”

Koutarou was able to read some ancient Forthorthe, having spent quite a bit of time in Forthorthe of 2,000 years ago. But he couldn't understand modern Forthorthe at all.

“That's right, I forgot.”

Since Clan had begun thinking of Koutarou as someone from Forthorthe, she had naturally used modern Forthorthe as the display language. She decided to report the results using her own words.

“Well, in total we need to sleep for ten years and 323 days, or almost 11 years.”

“11 years… couldn't you just count that in your head?”

“You're being mean now, Bertorion! You know it's not that simple!”

“It's just that you're more lively and fun when you're angry.”

“I'm not having any fun at all!”

Clan's temper erupted once again. That had been Koutarou's goal all along, but having gotten emotional, Clan didn't notice that.

“Ten years… I see, ten years huh…”

Upon hearing from Clan that this was ten years in the past, Koutarou noticed something. His expression unconsciously changed from a smile to a more serious one.

“Besides, you— what is it?”

Noticing that the atmosphere around Koutarou had changed, Clan's anger vanished. They had spent so much time together that she could tell when he was serious.

“It's nothing. It's just… I was just thinking that my mom dies soon.”

Koutarou's serious expression eased up a little and he showed Clan a small smile.

Koutarou and Clan had been sent to Forthorthe on January 24, 2010. So ten years and 323 days from that would make today's date March 7, 1999. Koutarou's mother passed away on April 16, 1999. In other words, in about 40 days from now, his mother would lose her life.

“…I understand how you must feel.”

Clan looked down a little before looking at Koutarou gently.

“Thank you, Clan… You should just always be like that.”

“That's none of your business.”

Since they were in the past, they could prevent all kinds of incidents if they tried. However, the two had decided that this wasn't realistic.

They would try to prevent any incidents that just happened to occur in their presence, like the mass murder in past Forthorthe, but they wouldn't use their knowledge to actively prevent any incidents.

If they went around preventing all the tragedies present, Koutarou and Clan would never make it back to their own world. For starters, the two weren't immortal, so they didn't have that much time, and they were also hesitant over if they were in the right to choose what accidents and incidents to prevent. That said, they couldn't overlook people hurting in front of them. So they would only help those. That was the same decision as the one that they had made at the mass murder in Forthorthe.

This decision was their last resort as a result of their time slip. They weren't gods, so there was a limit to what they could do. To put it more simply, they wouldn't use this time slip for personal reasons.

With this decision in place, Koutarou couldn't save his mother.

“Bertorion, it's your own mother, isn't it? Why don't we just pretend that decision was never made for a moment and save her?”

“Clan…”

Clan's suggestion greatly moved Koutarou. It was his own mother after all, so he was dying to save her.

But… can I really let Clan keep it in while I help myself?

When they had woken up for repairs ten years ago, a similar opportunity had presented itself to Clan. However, she endured it and returned to Earth without doing anything. Koutarou felt like him saving his mother was incredibly unfair. That was true, both for Clan and the vast majority who would never get such a chance.

And if I save mom, history will definitely change…

And another cause for concern was that history would change. If Koutarou's mother was to survive, the chance for him living in Corona House on his own was very low. Instead, chances were that his dad would just work away from home, and Koutarou would never meet with the invaders. And if that were to take place, Koutarou couldn't imagine what would happen. Like in sci-fi movies, he might lose his place to return to, or he himself might even disappear.

“Since we've come this far, I'll stick with you until the end. The royal families owe an immense amount to you.”

Clan was well aware of what Koutarou was worrying about and the dangers of it all. Despite knowing all of that, she still recommended it. That was a sign of friendship from Clan. At the same time, she believed it was a sign of gratitude from the Forthorthe royal families.

“Thank you, Clan. But… can you give me some time to think? I can't decide right away.”

He was happy over Clan's offer, but Koutarou wasn't sure what he should do.

If possible, he wanted to save his mother. But at the same time he wanted to return to his own world. That was why he had worked so hard up until now. And he also didn't know what would happen to himself and Clan if history did change.

What would happen to himself after saving his mother would be what he deserved, but that wasn't true for Clan. Koutarou couldn't find a method that would satisfy everyone. Because of that, he couldn't make up his mind right away.

“We still have time. Take your time to think about it.”

“Yeah…”

Koutarou nodded vaguely and looked up into the sky. The Cradle had already finished digging and had vanished underground, so silence had returned.

What should I do…?

However, Koutarou's mind was far from silent. His emotions were horribly disordered and his heart was beating as if he was doing some heavy exercises.

No matter what he chose, he would lose something. Both were precious and they couldn't be compared. Koutarou's mind was running around in circles, and as a result, the light from the twinkling stars never reached him.

“Hey, Onii-chan.”

That was when a voice called out to the troubled Koutarou. Surprised, he stopped his thoughts and looked in the direction of the voice, where he saw a young girl standing there.

“Did you see a star falling down around here? I am looking for that.”

It was a tiny girl, just a little too young to be going to elementary school. She was wearing a white robe and a long red skirt, a so-called shrine maiden's outfit. Her hair was short and a healthy light resided in her large eyes. Coupled with her shrine maiden outfit, she gave off the impression of an energetic young girl.

“A star you say? Well, I haven't seen one…”

While answering the girl, Koutarou tried to hide his shock. His surprise wasn't just because of her sudden appearance however.

She's talking about us…

The star the girl was looking for was most likely the Cradle that Koutarou and Clan had flown in on. She must have spotted the Cradle landing in this area and came to take a look.

“…Bertorion.”

Clan whispered to Koutarou.

“…Yeah, I know.”

Clan had only called for him, but Koutarou knew what she wanted. She wanted him to get a more detailed story from the girl. Most importantly, if there were any other witnesses.

“What about you, Onee-chan?”

“I-I haven't seen one.”

Not used to talking to strangers, Clan forced a vague smile as she answered the girl's question before quietly moving to Koutarou's back. She was planning on making him deal with the girl.

“Then did you hear a really loud sound? It went like, ‘wroooom!’”

The girl lifted her hands up into the sky and made an exaggerated gesture as she swung her arms around.

“Hmm, I can't quite remember. An airplane might have passed by though.”

“Hmm, I see…”

The girl nodded a couple of times and politely bowed.

“Thank you for telling me. Bye bye, Onii-chan, Onee-chan!”

After saying goodbye, the girl quickly turned away from the two and began running. Like one could have guessed from her appearance, she was an active girl. Seeing the girl running away, Koutarou quickly called out to her to stop her.

“Wait a moment! Where are you headed?”

The girl stopped and she looked back to answer Koutarou's question.

“I'm going to look around this area a little more! I want to find the star!”

“Wait a minute!”

Koutarou approached the girl with short steps. He couldn't just let her go like this. Seeing Koutarou do that, the girl stared at him with her eyes wide open.

“What is it?”

“I'll come with you. It's dangerous for a girl to be alone at this time of the day.”

There were two reasons why Koutarou decided to come with the girl.

The first was because he was worried for her, like he had said. The sun had already set and it was now pitch black outside, not to mention they were in the middle of an unpopulated mountain forest. Their footing was dark and the trees had grown in abundance; it was very dangerous for a small girl to travel alone.

The second reason was because he wanted to talk to the girl a little more. He wanted to make sure if there were others that would be looking for the Cradle.

“Will you help?”

“Yeah.”

“Really!? Thank you, Onii-chan!”

Seeing Koutarou nod, the girl's expression lit up. With her eyes wide open, she had a cheerful smile on her lips.

“You don't mind, do you Clan?”

Koutarou turned back to Clan to make sure, and she nodded.

“I will leave it to you. I will remain here and make preparations.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Koutarou would tag along with the girl while Clan remained here to prepare for the return to their own time. And so their jobs were naturally decided. Of course, Clan was shy to begin with so there wasn't really much of a choice.

“Oh, and Bertorion, take this with you.”

Clan tossed something towards Koutarou. Seeing that, he quickly grabbed it midair.

“This is…”

What Koutarou had grabbed was a silver bracelet, just like the one that Clan was wearing.

“You'll be troubled if you get lost, right?”

“So that's what it's for.”

Koutarou looked over the bracelet he had received.

This bracelet's original role was to serve as a remote control for the Cradle and the Hazy Moon. Because of that, it could communicate with the Cradle, display the ship's current position, observe the wearer's current condition and more. As long as he wore this, Koutarou wouldn't have to worry about getting lost. Since he wasn't wearing the Blue Knight's armor right now, he was in just as much danger in the dark forest as the girl.

While Koutarou was staring at the bracelet, Clan approached the girl and put a small badge on her chest.

“And this is for you.”

“What is this?”

The girl pulled on her own robe and gazed at the badge.

“With this, we'll be able to find you right away if you get lost.”

“I see, that's convenient.”

The girl let go of her robe and smiled at Clan. Unused to having strangers complimenting her, Clan blushed.

“I don't really get how to use it, but… thank you, Clan.”

After looking over the bracelet, Koutarou said his thanks and quickly put the bracelet around his right wrist. As a result, a small gem started glowing as a sign of the bracelet activating.

“That'll do it.”

“Then let's go!”

After putting on the bracelet, the girl grabbed his arm and started walking.

“Don't be in such a hurry, it's dangerous!”

“It'll be fine, you're such a worrywart, Onii-chan.”

“A-Anyways, Clan I'm off.”

“…Stay safe.”

Koutarou vanished into the woods, pulled by the girl. After seeing them off, Clan crossed her arms and slightly pouted.

“That Bertorion… why wouldn't he ask me to come with him? I might be uncomfortable around strangers, but still!”

Clan might be shy and have preparations to do, but she wasn't happy that Koutarou had left her behind without any hesitation.

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Part 4

Though she was looking for a star, it wasn't like she had any leads. The girl was relying only on her intuition as she walked around the dark forest. Their footing was dark and unsteady, but the girl's steps were firm. Seeing that, Koutarou sensed the strong determination of wanting to find the star from the girl.

"Uuhh~, it should have fallen around here…"

"Did you see it?"

"Yes. It came from the sky and zoomed past like that."

"And that's why you came looking for it?"

"Yes."

"All alone?"

"That's right! I came alone! When I left my home and came to this mountain alone the star came falling!"

Koutarou followed behind the girl as they talked.

There's no way she will find it… I should come up with a good way to get her to give up…

Looking at her back, he tried to come up with a way to dissuade her search. As they had scoured the area, Koutarou had learned all he wanted to know from the girl. She had come up to the mountains on her own, and just happened to see the Cradle. She was the one and only witness. If he could get her to give up on her star search, there wouldn't be any problems.

It was obvious that she wouldn't find her star, because what she was looking for, the Cradle, was already buried below the ground. No matter how hard she looked she would never find it. And she had already passed by the area where it had landed. But since Koutarou couldn't tell her that, he ended up letting her waste her time, which was quite painful for him.

Because of that, after learning everything he wanted, he was now trying to come up with a way to get her to give up instead.

"But it's dark. If you don't go home soon, your family will start worrying."

"That's okay. I'm looking for my mom."

"Your mom?"

An unexpected word left the girl's mouth. While Koutarou was puzzled by what she had said, the girl stopped, turned around and smiled at him.

"Ehehe, it's been a while since I last met mom."

"Weren't you looking for a star?"

"Yes I am. My mom's star."

"Ah…"

It was at that moment that Koutarou understood what the girl meant.

Is it possible that we've disturbed this girl's injured heart…?

And the girl's next words confirmed his fears.

"My mom said so. If she dies, she would become a blue star. And when I looked up at the sky before I saw a blue star falling! My mom must have found me and came to see me!"

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

The girl had lost her mother. And by chance she happened to see a blue star, the Cradle, falling down the sky and believed her mother had come to see her. That's why the girl was searching the mountain forest on her own.

If this girl notices that what she saw wasn't her mom's star…

If she doesn't find the star, the girl would surely be sad. When he thought of that, Koutarou was overcome by a feeling of guilt. If he and Clan hadn't landed down in this mountain, she wouldn't have to get so sad.

“…I'm sure you'll find her soon.”

Koutarou couldn't find it in him to tell the girl desperately searching for her mother that she wouldn't find her. He was well aware of the pain felt from losing your mother. That's why Koutarou had to say what he did, even if it was just a temporary comfort.

“Yeah! Thank you, Onii-chan!”

The girl gave him a big smile. Koutarou wanted that smile to remain unchanged.

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Part 5

More than four hours had now passed since they began walking through the mountain forest. Having looked for that long, even the energetic girl began showing signs of tiredness. That was when Koutarou suggested that they take a break by a nearby brook.

“Oh yeah, I never got your name.”

“Aha! Now that you say so!”

The girl had been so focused on finding her mother that she hadn't even introduced herself. And since she called Koutarou Onii-chan, she had no trouble getting by. Being it was just the two of them, Koutarou had no problem calling her 'you,’ Because of that, they hadn't gotten around to introducing themselves until now.

“I'm Kii!”

“Kii?”

“Yes!”

“I see, so you're called Kii…”

Koutarou had never heard that name before, but since there were a lot of kids with odd names nowadays he didn't think too much of it.

“What about you, Onii-chan?”

“Koutarou.”

“Hmm, Koutarou huh… what a weird name!”

“Is it weird?”

“Yeah!”

The girl called Kii gave Koutarou a large nod and smile. Seeing her bright expression, he felt himself getting happier as well.

I guess the name Koutarou is less used nowadays…

“Can I still call you Onii-chan?”

“Yeah. Can I call you Kii?”

“Yeah, that's okay! That's what mom called me!”

Kii cheerfully smiled and nodded. It was an innocent and happy smile, and it showed how much she had grown to trust Koutarou these few hours.

“But since dad calls me Kii, I prefer Kii-chan.”

“Why is that?”

“Because dad always gets so angry. Even before when I said I wanted to go see the movie he said no!”

“Alright, then I'll call you Kii-chan.”

“Yeah.”

Kii was in a motherless family.

She's the same as me…

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Even in the motherless Satomi family, there was a time where the relationship between father and son was awkward. Having recalled that, Koutarou could vaguely imagine Kii's relationship to her father. At the same time, he imagined that said father must be worried.

“Kii-chan, I'm sure your dad is worried sick about you at home. Why don't you go home for now and continue looking for the star tomorrow?”

“No.”

Kii puffed up her cheeks and shook her head.

“I won't go back home! I will live on my own!”

“What!?”

Hearing Kii's answer, Koutarou's eyes open wide in surprise.

“J-Just wait a minute! You mean you ran away from home!?”

“Yeah!”

Kii smiled and nodded.

“Dad won't take me to see the Kabutonga movie! So Kii came alone!”

The girl showed a smile full of pride. She was satisfied that she had been able to surprise Koutarou.

“T-This is bad! I have to take you to the police right away!”

“The police?”

“They're the people that will take you home!”

If Kii had ran away from home, her father might have filed a missing person report. And if he had, the police would be conducting a major search. If a search party looks through this mountain, they might find the Cradle.

In contrast to Kii's bright smile, Koutarou and Clan were faced with a potentially fatal danger.

“Hey, Clan—”

Koutarou activated the bracelet and was about to contact Clan.

“No!”

However, before he could, Kii reached over and pushed the button that Koutarou had used to activate the bracelet. The bracelet was returned to its standby mode.

“Kii-chan!?”

“If you take me to the police, I will tell them that you kidnapped me!”

“W-what!?”

Koutarou had an identity, but since this was ten years in the past, his age didn't match his birth year. Because of that, he would be treated like an unknown individual if the police were to arrest him. Of course the same was true for Clan. There was a high chance that they would be assumed to be illegal immigrants. And if they were made out to be kidnappers as well, that would be the least of their problems.

“Kii-chan, that's not good! You have to go home!”

Koutarou hurriedly tried persuading her. If he didn't get her to go home fast, the police might show up.

“I won't go home!”

However, Kii firmly refused and shook her head.

“I'm going to find mom and we'll go see Kabutonga!”

“Kii-chan…”

Kii had run away from home after fighting with her father because she wanted to see the movie. And after spotting the Cradle landing, she began looking for her mother's star. However, there was no way that she would find it. At this rate, she would just spend her time wandering the mountain all night.

“Kii-chan, if you do find that star and see the movie, will you go back home?”

It was a particularly difficult situation for Koutarou, but he couldn't just leave a young girl alone in the mountains. And so he began thinking of the best way that he could fulfill her wishes. He believed that letting her search for the star until she was satisfied, then taking her to the movie would be the best way to get her to go home.

“Hmm…”

Kii crossed her arms and began thinking about Koutarou's proposal. Her well-shaped eyebrows furrowed and gave off a mature impression.

Huh, this girl…?

Seeing that expression, Koutarou began feeling like he had seen her face before. But he couldn't tell who she was, and it wasn't all that important right now so he soon forgot about it.

“In that case… I might, go home…?”

That was the conclusion Kii reached as she held a finger on her chin.

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

Shooting Star and Runaway Daughter

She didn't really have much of a reason to run away from home to begin with, it was just a slight misunderstanding between her and her father born from the loss her mother. The only things that kept her from going home was the search for her mom's star and the Kabutonga movie. And once that was resolved, there was no reason for her not to go home.

“Then I'll help you out.”

“Really!?”

Kii's expression lit up once more from Koutarou's unexpected offer. Her mature expression vanished and her childish smile returned.

“Then promise me that you will go home once it's done.”

“Okay! I promise!”

Kii accepted Koutarou's proposal with a smile, since it was a welcome one for her as well. No matter how clever she was, she was still only six years old. There was no way she wouldn't be anxious after running away from home all alone. She had no reason to refuse Koutarou's proposal after he had reached his hand out to her and spent a few hours with her.

“Here.”

With a smile, Kii looked up at Koutarou and showed him her right hand.

“What?”

“A pinky swear. It's a promise, right?”

The girl formed a fist with her right hand and reached out with her pinky. Seeing that, Koutarou did the same as the girl and they twisted their pinkies.

“Pinky swear♪ If I lie I will swallow a thousand needles♪ Pinky sworn♪”

Thus, after exchanging their promise, they began moving together.

Searching for Her Mother

Part 1

After their pinky swear, Koutarou and Kii returned to the Cradle for a moment. The reason was because it was getting late. Since plenty of time had already passed since night had come, wandering around the mountain without direction would be bad. And so, Koutarou had decided to return to the Cradle for dinner and sleep.

Koutarou had been worried that Kii might oppose this idea, but she was unexpectedly obedient. She fully believed in the pinky swear that they had exchanged. Together with Koutarou, she would find her mother's star and watch the Kabutonga movie. To her, that was about as certain as reality, so she didn't disobey anything Koutarou said would be necessary.

“…And that's how I'll be looking after this girl for a short while.”

“You really do like getting into trouble no matter where you are, don't you?”

After having the situation explained to her, Clan’s shoulders dropped, and gave Koutarou an amazed look.

The first thing he had done upon returning was reporting this development to Clan. He had left Kii behind in the Cradle's living quarters and entered Clan's laboratory alone.

“It can't be helped. It's not my fault.”

“Well, that is true… but I have things to do, so you'll have to look after her.”

“I know. I won't cause any trouble for you.”

Clan had to make preparations for their return to their own time. She would freeze the time onboard the Cradle and return to the world ten years into the future. Though it sounded simple when put into words, there were a lot of preparations to be made. Freezing time was a very delicate procedure, so looking after Kii naturally became Koutarou's responsibility.

“Oh, and Clan, do you have anything that would be worth something?”

“Worth something?”

Hearing an unfamiliar term, Clan's eyes opened wide and she tilted her head.

“I don't have any money usable in this age. Since I have to take that girl to the movies, I will need money.”

The money currently in circulation in the time they were in would be replaced in a few years. Though Koutarou had new money in his wallet, it couldn't be used here. In order to move around in this age, money was needed, and that was why Koutarou asked if Clan had anything valuable on her.

“I'll work and repay you later, so could you give me something that would be worth some money?”

“I see, that's what you mean.”

As a princess, the idea of trading something valuable for money hadn't struck Clan. It wasn't until she heard it explained that she understood what he meant. She then approached a big shelf with materials she was using for research.

“Bertorion, platinum was a precious metal on this planet, wasn't it?”

“It should be, yes.”

“I'm sure I had some platinum to use as catalysts around here somewhere…”

Searching for Her Mother

Clan opened the shelf and began searching. Unlike the shelf in Koutarou's room, this one was neatly arranged and she was able to quickly find what she was looking for.

“Ah, here it is.”

Clan pulled out a mass of platinum from the shelf and brought it near Koutarou.

“Please use this.”

Clan casually put the mass of platinum down on a desk.

Pure platinum is very dense and was much heavier than one would guess just from looking at it. When the platinum was put down on the desk, it let out a heavy, profound sound loud enough to make the desk shake.

“This is some spare material, and I still have plenty more. Feel free to use it as you please. If it doesn't seem like it's enough, let me know right away.”

But after seeing the platinum, Koutarou yelled at Clan with all his might.

“Are you an idiot!?”

“W-What now all of a sudden!?”

Surprised by the sudden shout, Clan jumped back from him while Koutarou continued his assault on her.

“As if I could pawn this in a pawnshop! I only need a fragment!”

“W-Was that so!?”

The platinum that Clan had put on the desk was at the very least five kilos. Since platinum was worth around 4,000 to 5,000 yen per gram, that mass would amount to several ten million yen. It was unlikely that a pawnshop would be able to buy it right away.

“Just how spoiled are you! You should learn what it's like to be a commoner! Don't you want to become the empress!?”

“T-Then I'll just appoint a commoner to—”

“Don't be so over-reliant!”

It wasn't until a little while later that Koutarou grabbed a few grams of platinum.

Searching for Her Mother

Part 2

When Clan was targeting Koutarou and Theia, a TV had been installed inside the Cradle's living quarters. She had been using it as one of her methods to gather information; she studied culture and language, as well as analyzing broadcasting techniques to get an understanding of Earth's technological level. For example, by examining the encryption used in digital broadcasts, she could calculate the standard processing speeds of computers.

When Koutarou returned to the living quarters, Kii was stuck in front of that TV and was deeply invested in the program currently airing. Since the TV had been made using one of the spaceship's multipurpose monitors, it was over 100 inches big. Because of that, Koutarou could see what was on the TV despite Kii being right in front of it.

“Oh… so they're rebroadcasting that…”

The show on the TV was an anime, and the show was so famous that even Koutarou who wasn't into anime knew about it. It was called The King of Beetles, Kabutonga, an animated hero show featuring characters designed after beetles.

“Look out, No. 1! Behind you!”

On the screen, the show's protagonist, Kabutonga No. 1, was in danger. In order to keep him from losing, Kii was grasping her small hands and desperately cheering for him. She was a big fan of this anime; she had even run away from home just to watch the movie that was released the other day. Her cheering was so intense that she didn't even notice Koutarou returning to the living quarters.

By the way, despite it being night, this anime was being rebroadcasted to promote the movie.

“There! Give him your Kabutonga Kick!”

“…She looks like she's having fun.”

Since Kii looked so happy, Koutarou chose not to call out to her. Instead, he passed by her and entered the living quarter's kitchen. He was going to prepare dinner while Kii was watching the show.

Kabutonga?

However just as he entered the kitchen, he stopped. Something about the word Kabutonga had slightly caught his interest. But in the end, it was just regarding an anime. Without thinking too much of it, Koutarou stepped further into the kitchen. What was important to him now wasn't some anime hero, but dinner.

“Aaaaahhh! That's unfair, Scarab King! Stag Man, hurry! You have to save Kabutonga!”

With Kii's shouting as background music, Koutarou opened the storage cabinet inside the kitchen. Inside were all kinds of ingredients.

“We should eat these up soon…”

Koutarou pulled out some of the ingredients from the cabinet. They were all food that they had taken with them from Forthorthe.

The storage had two kinds of food in it: food that was already in there before this entire thing began, and food that they had gotten in Forthorthe. The former was packaged so that it could be preserved, but the same wasn't true for the latter. That was why he had decided on eating the latter. Though the storage also functioned as a refrigerator, he couldn't get too overconfident.

“Stag Man! Your drill! You can just use your drill!”

“I see. So today's episode is 'Kabutonga dies at daybreak,’ No wonder she's so fired up…”

Searching for Her Mother

Koutarou spoke to himself as he put various ingredients into a nearby basket. With the basket in hand, he now headed toward the living quarter's warehouse. Inside there were a lot of things besides food, including a lot of things from the past Forthorthe.

“Here we go.”

From there, Koutarou took some firewood. With that in hand, he returned to the living quarters.

“Kabutonga, wake up! Kabutonga!”

Koutarou passed behind Kii once more and headed towards the airlock.

He was planning on making dinner outside. Since all of the ingredients were from Forthorthe of 2,000 years, he believed it would be better to cook them using a fireplace rather than using a cutting edge kitchen. He also didn't like the Cradle's overly advanced kitchen. So with that in mind, he headed outside.

“First off is…”

Once outside, Koutarou gathered large stones and made a simple wind cover. With that, even if the wind blew, the fire wouldn't go out of control. This was some life experience he had learned in Forthorthe.

Next, Koutarou placed the firewood inside the wind cover. The trick was piling the firewood up while taking the flow of air into consideration. And with skilled hands, he built up the fireplace.

“Next up is this.”

After beautifully piling the firewood up, Koutarou held a single stick that he had also pulled out of the warehouse. More accurately, it wasn't a stick, but rather a beautifully decorated cane over a meter-and-a-half long. With the cane in hand, Koutarou held the tip of it in front of his face.

“Uhm… fire, appear!”

As if obeying Koutarou's words, a small flame lit up by the tip of the cane. Despite not having anything for fuel, it burned like a candle above the cane. It would have been a very bizarre sight for anyone who wasn't aware of the circumstances.

“If I give her this, Yurika will definitely be overjoyed…”

This cane was a present that Koutarou had brought with him from the past Forthorthe, for Yurika. It was actually a real magical cane.

This cane called Encyclopedia, was used by Koutarou's former enemy, the head of the court magicians, Grevanas. Though the magician himself had been thrown outside of the universe because of the super-space-time repulsion shell, this cane, which he had parted with during the battle, had been left behind.

Magical canes were normally used as an assisting tool for magicians to cast spells. The cane heightened the user's concentration and amplified their magical power to make their spells even more potent. There were also canes that had special abilities on top of that, and this Encyclopedia was one of those canes.

The special ability this cane had was the ability to read its user's mind and cast spells using its own power. As a result, the user of this cane could cast their own spell while simultaneously having the cane cast another. This was an incredibly useful advantage in a battle between magicians.

And thanks to this ability, even people who weren't magicians could use magic recorded in the cane. Like its name, Encyclopedia, implied, it had a large variety of spells recorded. But as a result, the power of each spell was reduced. Since the cane's magical power was finite, the

number of recorded spells was inversely proportionate to the power. So even if the person using the cane had absolutely no talent when it came to casting spells, they would still be about as capable as a mediocre magician. That was why Koutarou had gone out of his way to bring the cane with him to make Yurika a real magical girl.

“Magic really is convenient…”

Koutarou pointed the tip of the cane at the firewood and lit a flame. Before long, the fire had spread through all of the firewood and become a large red fire. It was more than hot enough to use to prepare a meal. Since normally just creating a fire would take a lot of time, the cane was quite useful.

“Alright, then let's get started.”

And as such, Koutarou used the fire he had prepared to make dinner.

Searching for Her Mother

Part 3

Despite the anime having ended, Kii was still excited.

The hero she adored had been defeated by his enemy, but after that he made a miraculous recovery and won in a huge turnaround. Kii couldn't help but be excited because of that and was eager to talk about the episode with someone.

“Onii-chan, where are you?”

That someone was of course Koutarou. He was the only one she had talk to now, and she felt like he would listen to her.

“Where did he go?”

Kii looked around the living quarters. Since this was the residential area of a small spaceship, it was only about as big as a normal living room. Because of that, she quickly understood that nobody else was there.

“Huh?”

That was when Kii felt like she could smell something. She took several sniffs to confirm what it was.

“…Something smells really good…”

The smell that Kii had picked up was the fragrant smell of something roasting.

With that smell in her mind, Kii's stomach let out a growl. That was when she finally realized that she hadn't eaten anything for a while.

“Is it… this way?”

Lured by her curiosity, Kii's nose twitched as she followed the smell. She walked out from the living quarters, through a corridor and headed outside of the ship through the hatch that had been left opened. That was when she finally found out the identity of the smell.

“Waa! It's a feast!”

A pot was resting on top of a red flame, and inside it were seafood and vegetables in a boiling soup. There was also a spit-roasted meat resting above the fire. Covered in lots of herbs, oils and spices, the large piece of meat was dripping meat juice down onto the ground. There was also bread lying next to the fireplace, being warmed up by the fire.

The smell that Kii had followed belonged to this food. Though she had been so focused on her show until just a little while ago, the only thing she could do now was stare at the food in front of her.

“So you came, Kii-chan.”

“Did you make all of this, Onii-chan!?”

“Yeah. I'm not really that good though.”

Today's dinner was fish and vegetable soup, chicken kabob, and bread full of nuts. The bread had only been heated, but Koutarou had made the other two dishes.

Koutarou was capable of doing housework. Since he had grown up with only his father, he could not only clean, but could also cook. But since the invaders were in charge of cooking in Corona House, he had no chance to show off his skills. When he was travelling for long distances in the past Forthorthe, he had plenty of chances to cook. As a result, he was now quite familiar with cooking outdoors. Though he couldn't call himself a professional, he was good enough to serve others. That said, in the end these were dishes from past Forthorthe.

Searching for Her Mother

“That's not true! It looks really good!”

“We'll find out if it's good or not when we eat it.”

“I want to eat it right away!”

“It'll be done in just a moment, so just sit down over there and wait.”

“Okay!”

Even though her stomach had been growling since she had found the food, she obeyed Koutarou and sat down on a log near the fire. Since she was a clever child, she knew that she would be able eat something delicious if she didn't get in his way as he cooked.

“How's the soup…? Ah, good, it came out nice.”

“Ehehe.”

Obediently sitting down and waiting, Kii followed Koutarou with her eyes. As she did that, she was being filled with a warm sensation, and it wasn't just because of the fire. It was thanks to the warm memories overflowing from the bottom of her chest.

“Mom, is dinner done yet?”

“In just a moment, so sit down over there and wait.”

“Oka~y! What are we getting today?”

“Fufu, it's Kii-chan's favorite.”

“This smell is… fish!”

“That's right. Just wait a little more for it to finish cooking, okay?”

“Okay! Kii will wait like a good child!”

Someone she was close to was making food for her. The person that had done so in the past was her mother. That was probably why Kii was remembering her mother when she stared at Koutarou's back, and it was those memories that warmed her chest.

“Kii will wait like a good child… so make it delicious.”

“I can't make any promises, but I'll try.”

That was the warmth of a person that Kii hadn't felt for a while.

Part 4

Koutarou turned the basket he had used to carry the ingredients and made a table for Kii. He put the soup, bread and kabob down along with tableware. With those three dishes in front of her, Kii's eyes opened as wide as they possibly could and sparkled.

“Can I eat it!? Can I!?”

“Go ahead. Make sure you don't get it stuck—”

“Thank you for the food!”

“—in your throat.”

Kii had started eating before Koutarou could even finish his sentence. Holding a spoon for the soup in her right hand and a kabob in her left, she alternated between eating the soup and chicken. Her pace was rapid, and one could imagine that she liked the taste.

“I'm glad you're so energetic.”

Sensing that Kii was satisfied, Koutarou showed a small smile and picked up some bread for himself. He then split the bread and put chicken between it. That was his favorite way of eating in Forthorthe. After a bite, a familiar taste spread throughout his mouth. It was a nostalgic taste that reminded him of his time in Forthorthe.

I'm sure Clan will give this a passing grade…

While eating his dinner, Koutarou thought of his partner, who had shut herself in her laboratory. Since she was raised as a princess, she was picky about taste. But he was sure she would surely compliment today's dishes. He was proud of the dishes he had made today.

That was when Koutarou looked up as he sensed someone's glance.

“…”

As he did, he found a pair of large eyes. It was Kii who was staring at his hands.

“I want to try too!”

Kii mimicked Koutarou; she split the bread, put some meat in between and took a bite.

“Delicious!”

She seemed to enjoy that way of eating as she took even more bites. And now she looked like a squirrel eating a nut.

“If you eat that fast, you'll—”

“Hueh.”

Just before Koutarou could warn Kii about choking on her food, a piece of bread got stuck in her throat.

“Uuuh, Huhuhuu.”

“Here, drink this.”

Koutarou quickly presented Kii with the soup. In response, Kii began drinking directly from the plate. After doing that for several seconds, Kii removed her lips from the plate while sighing.

“Haaaah, I thought I was going to die…”

Fortunately, the bread that Kii was choking on slipped down her throat and into her stomach. Relieved, the girl's expression returned to the normal cheerful one.

“It's because you eat it so fast.”

Searching for Her Mother

“But it's just so good.”

Kii had an embarrassed blush when Koutarou admonished her.

“I'm glad you like it, but nobody is going to take it from you, and there's more to get, so you can eat slower.”

“O-Okay, I will. Ehe, Ehehehe.”

Eventually Kii let out an embarrassed laugh. Seeing that, Koutarou showed a small smile and began eating again.

This kind of reminds me of everyone…

It was a noisy but fun dinner, just like in room 106 and the past Forthorthe. Even though he was far away from either of those, it reminded Koutarou of his everyday life. Kii's appearance right now reminded him of that.

“Hehehe… ehehe… uhhh.”

While Koutarou was reminiscing, Kii's laughter changed its tone. It was a soft laughter, with what sounded like sobs mixed in. And the light from the fire reflected off the tears running down her cheeks.

Kii was crying.

“What's wrong? Did it taste bad?”

Koutarou panicked and tasted his own soup, but the taste was alright.

Then why?

Confused, Koutarou looked at Kii. Despite tears running down her cheeks she had a calming smile.

“That's not it. It's good, it's really good. And I'm so happy…”

Kii shook her head as she said that. But even though she said she was happy, her tears weren't stopping.

“It's just… it's been a long time since I had such a good and happy dinner… so, so I… ehehe, I don't… understand either…”

Hearing her words, Koutarou could imagine what was going on in her mind.

I see… Kii-chan really misses her mother…

After losing her mother, Kii and her father misunderstanding each other was the final straw that caused her to run away from home. It had been quite a long time since she had been able to smile at the dinner table. It reminded her of the times when she had been happy. Just like when Koutarou was reminded of his everyday life, Kii was reminded of her time with her family. Since Koutarou had gone through a similar experience as her, he understood how she felt.

“B-But you know? I made up my mind! Hehe, w-when I grow up, I'll be able to cook! Uuuhhh, I'll learn to get as g-good, as Onii-chan…”

Kii became convinced that the best way to meet her mother again was through a delicious dinner and smiles at the dinner table.

After that, Koutarou and Kii discussed all kinds of things while eating. Though they had introduced themselves, they still barely knew anything about each other.

“By the way, what do you do, Onii-chan? Are you a cook?”

“If I was a cook, the meal would have tasted better.”

Searching for Her Mother

Kii had now stopped crying. Instead, she was now showing an even more affectionate and energetic smile towards Koutarou. Seeing that she had regained her smile, Koutarou felt happy. A child should always be smiling.

“That might be true. But Kii knows.”

“What?”

“Taste alone doesn't determine if a dish is delicious.”

Kii smiled and brought a kabob towards her mouth as she said that. She seemed to have taken a real liking to Koutarou's cooking, and while she cheerfully spoke, she chowed down on the food at a fearsome pace. She had already taken her second helpings of all the dishes.

“Onii-chan could become a cook.”

“Ahahaha, that's an honor. But I'm not a cook. I'm actually in the middle of a journey.”

“A journey? Is that thing where you go somewhere far away?”

Unfamiliar with the word, Kii tilted her head as she asked. In response, Koutarou gave her a firm nod.

“Yeah. To be more accurate, I've already finished my journey, and now I’m on my way to my hometown.”

“Hmm, so that would be around here?”

“That's about right.”

Koutarou kept his explanation vague; even if he told a six-year-old girl that he was returning to the future, she would only be confused. Just telling her that he was on his way to his hometown was the most comprehensible way to explain.

“A hometown is where you are born, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Going back to where you were born…”

After talking about hometowns, Kii began thinking of her own. However, Kii had ran away from there. She shook her head to chase the thoughts out of it and smiled at Koutarou again.

“So where did you come from, Onii-chan?”

“Hmm, that would be hard to explain, but…”

Koutarou racked his brain for a moment trying to come up with an answer for Kii's question. It was difficult explaining it to a six-year-old girl.

“What if I were to say, I came from an endless time and a countless distance.”

In the end, Koutarou answered in a theatrical tone and gesture. Seeing that, Kii's attention was brought away from what he had actually said to what he was doing, and she started to cheerfully laugh.

“Ahahaha, you're acting too cool, Onii-chan.”

“I actually thought the same thing.”

Koutarou smiled wryly.

I'm really not suited for acting… I'll have to retire after my next play…

After thinking that, Koutarou looked at Kii and dropped his shoulders.

“So where did you really come from?”

Searching for Her Mother

Kii understood that Koutarou's answer was a joke, and after the two of them had stopped laughing, she asked him again.

“From nearby. But getting there is a bit complicated, so I don't think you’d be able to reach it, Kii-chan.”

“Is it like a maze?”

“Yeah. But when you grow up, I bet it'll be really easy.”

“Hmm…”

Not quite sure if she understood it or not, Kii looked towards the city at the foot of the mountain. She could barely make out Harukaze city, and thanks to the headlights of cars passing by, she could see the roads all the way from where she was.

I could get lost…

Kii felt like she would get lost walking down the complexly intertwined roads. Satisfied, she looked back at Koutarou again.

“But, it's around here, right?”

“Yeah. Once I've taken a break here, I'll go home.”

Seeing Koutarou nod, Kii smiled.

“Fufufu, I see…”

“What is it?”

Kii seemed very happy.

Curious about why she was smiling, Koutarou asked her.

“No, it's nothing. It's a girl's secret.”

But Kii wouldn't answer him. She was hiding the reason behind her cheerful smile.

“Girls have a lot of those.”

At this moment, Kii looked just like the invading girls. It was the smile they'd show whenever they wanted to trouble him. So even though Koutarou's shoulders slightly dropped, he felt happy.

“Ehehe, a maiden's heart is an eternal mystery.”

Kii was smiling because she was thinking of what would happen after she had separated with Koutarou.

If he is from around here we will meet again…

Since Kii had promised that she would go back home after finding the star and watching the movie, they would eventually separate. But if she were to return to this town later for some business, she might meet him again. And that made her really happy.

Searching for Her Mother

Part 5

After finishing his own meal, Koutarou headed to Clan to give her some too.

Clan was still in the laboratory, working on getting them back to the present age. While staring at a hologram floating in the air, she quickly calculated something on the computer.

Koutarou set the dishes on a table intended for taking breaks. If he put it here, Clan would eat it while taking a break from her work. After setting down the dishes, he quickly headed towards the exit to not get in Clan's way.

“Thank you, Bertorion.”

“…I just hope you like it.”

That was all the two spoke before Koutarou left the room.

I just hope that Clan doesn't ruin her body…

Koutarou had seen Clan be serious several times before this. Like when she was desperately trying to treat the virus in Forthorthe, or when she was trying to freeze time for the first time. When she was serious, her expression got stiffer and she changed from a girl to a researcher. When she was like that, she would focus entirely on her research and ignore her own needs.

I can't leave her on her own, though for a different reason than Yurika…

While Clan was in her serious mode, Koutarou's job was to look after her health. He would give her as healthy a meal as possible and do housework like cleaning and washing. If he didn't, the Cradle would just end up as a mess. As a result, Koutarou was practically working as her attendant.

“I guess I'll clean up for now…”

Koutarou's next job was cleaning up after dinner. He would put out the fire and put the leftovers in the fridge. It was a plain, but important task. Koutarou rolled up his sleeves and left the Cradle again. Outside, he saw that Kii had dozed off next to the fire that had grown weaker.

“Zzz… Zzz…”

Kii was exhausted, having spent a lot of time walking around the mountain, and she had been very energetic the entire time. So after having a delicious dinner, all of the day's exhaustion hit her and she dozed off.

“Well, it's only natural…”

It must have been hard for a young girl like Kii, having run away from home after a fight with her father. Koutarou showed a small smile and reached out to Kii's body. In order to make sure that she didn't wake up while he was cleaning, he would put her to bed in the Cradle's living quarters first.

“Mmm… mom…”

However, just before he reached her, he stopped upon hearing the words she had spoken in her sleep. The next moment, Kii's expression changed into a sad one.

“Where… where are you… Kii is here…”

Kii's hand moved slightly as she spoke in her sleep. She was moving her hand in her dream, so her arm moved a little in reality as well.

“She's looking for her mom, even in her dreams…”

Because of what Kii had said in her sleep and her sad expression, Koutarou could imagine what she was dreaming of. She was wandering all alone in the dark forest.

Searching for Her Mother

“If only she could at least find her star… find her mother in her dream…”

Koutarou knew that Kii wouldn't find her mother's star in the real world. She would without a doubt never find it, and end up disappointed. Sadly, there was nothing Koutarou could do for her about that.

And now she was looking for that star in her dreams. She must know that she probably wouldn't find the star as well. That's why she couldn't find the star, her mother, in her dream. Koutarou found that incredibly sad. He wanted her wish to be fulfilled at least in her dreams.

“But, there's not much I can do when she's dreaming…”

He knew that Kii was sad. But he couldn't do anything. There was no way he could be of her help in her dreams.

“Something magical like that can't…”

Koutarou was overcome with helplessness. It was hard for him to watch a child crying while dreaming. Even more so since he knew it was his and Clan's fault that she was crying.

Wait, magical!?

However, that was when Koutarou found a solution in his own words. It was a revelation.

“That's right, magic! With magic I just might be able to help!”

Koutarou stared at a cane lying next to the fireplace. It was the cane called Encyclopedia that he had taken with him from Forthorthe. Using the magic from this cane, he might be able to be of Kii's help.

“No… that might be even better…”

Next, Koutarou looked towards the Cradle. A sword had been left in his room inside that ship. It was much more potent than the magical cane in front of him.

“I'm sure Signaltin would do it!”

It was a power intended to save people that he had gotten from Alaia. Using the sword imbued with Alaia's feelings, it would surely be more effective than the cane when it came to helping Kii. With that in his mind, Koutarou rushed inside the Cradle.

Searching for Her Mother

Part 6

Inside the dream, Kii herself wasn't aware that she was dreaming. She was wandering the mountain, created by her own desire, all alone.

“H-Huh? What, am I doing here…?”

A person's dream often starts without any connection. But most of the time, that abnormality goes by unnoticed. The person's ability to make decisions was hindered, and even more so in a world produced from one's own desires.

“That's right, I'm looking for mom!”

That was true for Kii as well. Without doubting why she was in the mountains on her own, she began to wander. Since deep down she wanted to continue looking for her mother, she didn't think it was strange that it really happened, and her last memories of eating dinner with Koutarou had slipped away. Dream worlds were irrational.

“Mom! Where are you!?”

Kii combed through the dark mountain forest while calling for her mother. However, no one answered her calls.

“Where!? Where are you! Kii is here!”

Kii believed that the blue star that had fallen from the sky was her mother. But at the same time, she felt uneasy; she was worried that she might not find it, or that her mother hadn't noticed her. It could also be that the star wasn't her mother, but she didn't want to think about that.

Truth be told, today wasn't the first day that Kii had gone looking for her mother. She had done this many times before.

If she would hear a sound whenever she was all alone in her house. she would rush to find the source of it thinking her mother had returned, only to find that something had fallen off a shelf.

Or she might think she saw her mother's back, only to find that it was a completely different person when they turned around.

Kii's hopes had been betrayed like that many times before. It was very hard for a six-year-old girl to accept that her mother had passed away. Even though she knew, she couldn't help but look, even though she would only get disappointed. Something deep inside of her just couldn't accept the fact that she would never meet her mother again.

“Mom! Don't be mean! I want to see you!”

This time, Kii had seen a blue star falling down with her own eyes. Since it matched with what her mother had said, Kii was certain that this time she would find her. But even then she was uneasy, worried that the same thing might happen again.

“Mom… why… why won't you come meet me…?”

Her dreams made that uneasiness a reality as her surroundings grew darker. Her surroundings went silent, and she was alone. Despite her earnest wish, she became trapped in a nightmare.

“Can't you hear Kii's voice!? Or do you hate Kii now!?”

The night grew darker; she couldn't even hear her own footsteps. Kii's solitude grew stronger by the second, and it made her uneasiness worse. Which in turn made her dream worse. It was a vicious spiral.

“Come meet me, mom! Kii has never stopped looking!”

Searching for Her Mother

Kii desperately called for her mother. She was practically screaming by now. However, there was no response from the darkness. Kii's voice was absorbed by the darkness instead; the night absorbed her grief and grew darker, surrounding her. Before she knew it, her entire surroundings were pitch-black, and Kii was all alone.

“Mom! Uuuuhhh, where am I!? Uaaa… aa… I'm scared, mom! Uuuuh, hurry, come save me!”

Kii could only continue screaming. Her hopes had been betrayed once more, and silence was the only response she got when calling for her mother. She couldn't deal with the solitude, and her heart was breaking. That was why she had gotten into a fight with her father. Even though she wanted him to dote on her, she never got any warmth from him and ran away from home.

“Noo! I don't want to be alone! Mom, mom, uuuhhh, uuu, uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Since Kii was so clever for her age, she bottled that solitude and sadness up inside of her, and while she hid it from others by smiling, she was crying on the inside.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaa, uaaaaaa, uaaaaaaaaaaa!”

And just as Kii was about to break from sadness in the darkness–

“So this is where you were, Kii-chan. I've been looking for you.”

She heard a nostalgic voice.

And her crying stopped immediately.

“Ah…?”

In the corner of Kii's view, she saw a blue light. It was a gentle and clear blue light. It had the same color as the falling star she had seen.

“M-Mom…?”

Kii slowly raised her head and turned towards the blue light with a spaced out look.

“It's been a long time, Kii-chan… I wanted to meet you…”

Kii had found her.

She had found her mother that she had been dying to meet again. She stood in front of Kii, wrapped in a blue light.

“Mom! It's mom! It really was mom!”

Her mother had an energetic appearance and gentle smile, just like when she was alive. When Kii saw that, she began running towards her.

“Mom! I came to meet you just like I promised! I chased after a star to find you!”

And when she was right in front of her mother, she kicked off the ground with all her might. It was a jump at full force, convinced that her mother would catch her.

“My, my, that's dangerous, Kii-chan.”

“Mom!”

Just like Kii had expected, her mother caught her in her arms.

She felt a nostalgic warmth and a gentle smell.

Kii was firmly holding onto to the person she had been looking for, and she would never let go again.

“Mom, mom!”

“What's wrong, Kii-chan… you're more affectionate than usual?”

Searching for Her Mother

And the mother embraced Kii back. She could feel Kii's warmth, Kii's momentum when she had jumped into her and Kii's arms around her body, and when she felt that, tears formed in her eyes. Just like Kii had always wanted to meet her mother, her mother had always wanted to meet Kii.

Part 7

Using Signaltin, Koutarou had made a wish, 'I don't care how, I just want Kii to meet her mother, at least in her dream,' Because of that, he didn't actually know what Signaltin had done. All he knew was that a large amount of magical power that contained Alaia's presence had begun flowing out of the sword and into Kii.

"…Did it… work…?"

A few seconds after the magical power began flowing into Kii, her expression changed from one of sadness to a gentle smile. At the same time, her breathing slowed down, and he could sometimes hear laughter coming from her.

"Fufufu… mom… fufufu…"

"I see… you met your mother…"

Seeing Kii's smile and hearing her sleep talking, Koutarou sensed that he had succeeded. He then slowly returned Signaltin to its sheath in order to not wake her up.

Thank you, your majesty…

At the same time, he thanked Alaia. He had been able to restore Kii's peace of mind using Signaltin after his and Clan's arrival had dug up some sad memories. Since Koutarou wasn't sure if he could do the same using Encyclopedia, he couldn't keep himself from thanking Alaia.

"…I was looking for you with Onii-chan…"

"…Hahaha, do I have to make an appearance too?"

Koutarou smiled and decided to carry Kii to a bed inside the Cradle, like he had planned from the start. She would surely have a nicer dream in a fluffy bed, than outside.

"Hm?"

And while Koutarou was reaching out to Kii–

A person's presence?

Searching for Her Mother

Searching for Her Mother

Koutarou sensed someone's presence and turned to look behind him.

"…"

A lone girl was standing a few meters behind him. Based on her appearance, the small girl looked to be around ten years old. She was wearing some school's uniform and she was gazing at Koutarou.

Why would a girl be out here at this time of the hour?

It was already past midnight. Disregarding Kii who had run away from home, it was far too late for a girl to be walking around alone. Her being here was very strange.

"…What are you doing out here at this time?"

Koutarou asked the girl. The girl looked to be older than Kii, but like he had done with Kii, he would talk to the girl and get her to go home.

"I'm looking for someone."

The girl answered indifferently, without a change in expression.

"Someone?"

"I thought it might have been you, but I was wrong."

"Is that so. But it's already late, so you should stop looking and go home."

Based on how the girl was acting, Koutarou believed that she might be quite mature for her age. He felt a mature presence like he had with Alaia.

"I'll do just that."

The girl nodded and spun around, showing Koutarou her back, and proceeded to walk away.

What a strange girl…

Koutarou thought that as he looked at the girl walking away.

The girl had clear and earnest eyes. He could feel a strong intention, contrasting her youthful appearance. Koutarou had met several girls like that before, but this was the first time he had seen them on a girl this young.

And she had appeared in the middle of a mountain forest at night. It didn't look like she had ran away from home like Kii, so Koutarou found it very mysterious.

"That's right, there's one thing I want you to tell me."

Just before she was about to vanish into the darkness, the girl stopped and turned around to look at Koutarou. And those earnest eyes of hers gazed upon him.

It's like she has her majesty Alaia's calmness and Flair's sense of duty…

Koutarou felt a strange sensation as the girl's powerful gaze stared through him. He felt it was bizarre that he could feel that from a girl around ten years old.

"You… what were you doing to that girl with that sword?"

"Wha…"

The girl's question greatly shook Koutarou. He found himself at a loss for words as his heart skipped a beat.

Did she see me!?

Koutarou finally understood why the girl had appeared in front of her. She had come to confirm why he had been pointing his sword at Kii.

Searching for Her Mother

What does she want to know… what should I answer her…?

Koutarou began hesitating.

She probably wouldn't believe him if he said that he had been casting a spell on Kii. And based on her behavior and way of talking, he probably couldn't hide it with a half-assed excuse. He also didn't want to say something bad and get the police called over.

Gathering his thoughts, Koutarou decided to tell her some degree of the truth, though leaving magic out of it. If he didn't he wouldn't be able to convince her. Koutarou took a deep breath to calm down and carefully chose his words as he answered her.

“…This girl just lost her mother. She was having a nightmare, so I was casting a charm on her with this sword. Apparently, this weapon had that kind of power.”

Pretty much everything he had said had been the truth. He had hidden the part about magic, so this was as realistic he could get it. A charm would be easier to understand than a spell.

“I see… then it looks like the charm worked. She looks like she's having a nice dream.”

Saying that, the girl smiled for the first time. It might have been because she had a serious expression the entire time, but Koutarou felt like the girl's smile was extremely gentle.

“…Children have the right to have good dreams.”

“I agree.”

Still smiling, the girl nodded and turn away from Koutarou again.

“Well then.”

“Yeah.”

With those few words as her good bye, the girl left and disappeared into the darkness.

She really was a strange girl…

Though they hadn't spoken a lot, Koutarou felt like he could believe in the girl. She was a mysterious girl that naturally made him feel that way.

“Damn, I forgot to ask her name…”

The name and goal of the girl that had suddenly appeared in front of him remained a mystery.

The Lost Tribe

Part 1

After parting with Koutarou, the girl had stopped after walking along a mountain path for a while. And without doing anything, she silently waited.

“Nana-chan!”

After some time passed, another person approached her. That person was a woman in her late twenties, and she made quite an impression with her long hair and large bow. The girl called Nana had been waiting here for her.

“Kanae-san, it was a miss.”

Nana called the woman approaching her Kanae. Kanae cooperated with Nana and they had been working together since a while back.

“So that really was the case…”

Based on the fact that Nana had returned without fighting, Kanae could guess what had happened, but she still dropped her shoulders. This was a disappointment for her. Kanae was gentle, so she didn't want to use her bow to fight, but it would be better for a fight to occur for her to fulfill her goal.

“Since there was a reaction for summoning, necromancy and mind manipulation, I was sure this time was the one… but it was someone completely opposite.”

“Opposite? But if he used all those, he has to be a bad person, right? Didn't he use necromancy to possess that girl?”

Through summoning, necromancy and mind manipulation, one could summon the spirit of the dead and employ them. This was a method that a type of evil wizards, called necromancers, liked to use. Necromancers tended to use the dead for their own gain.

“It looked like that at first, but that wasn't the case. That man used the sword's power to summon the girl's dead mother and let them meet in her dream.”

The man had ordered the sword to summon the girl's mother's soul in a temporarily stable form, and then let the girl meet her mother in her dream. Though he had used the same kind of spells that necromancers did, the end result was completely different from what Nana had expected.

Nana had approached the mysterious man to confirm what kind of spell he had cast. Though she could confirm what type of magic had been used from afar, she couldn't tell how it was being used until she got closer.

“So you mean it was a good necromancer?”

“Yes. It's an extremely rare case. This is the first time I've met a good necromancer…”

As the girl said that she looked back. She was normally very strict, but her eyes showed a very gentle expression at this time.

Nana had never seen a necromancer use magic like that before. If it was only to speak with the dead, fortune telling magic was more effective. Going through the trouble to summon a soul and invading a dream was just a waste of magic power. But by going through that effort, it made the caster's goals quite clear.

He didn't just let the two of them talk, he actually had them meet and let them touch one another. Technically it's a kind of possession, but… to think that a necromancer could do that…

In the organization that Nana was a part of, private use of magic was forbidden. That was because if there were a lot of people that could use magic, some would appear to abuse it and

satisfy their own desires. Firearms were under strict control in modern nations for the same reason. And Nana had fought against people who abused magic to fulfill their own desires many times. However, now she had seen someone who was quite the opposite of that.

“If the world was full of magicians like that… our job would be a lot easier…”

It was like a flower blooming in a bloodied battlefield. If that flower sowed a lot of seeds, their futures might become brighter. That's how Nana felt.

“But Nana-chan, don't we need to report this?”

Regardless of the reason, it didn't change the fact that the man had made private use of magic. Nana had an obligation to report to her organization and formally eliminate him.

“There's no need for that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes… fortunately, he used magic of a different style than ours. Since he wasn't abusing it, it's not in our jurisdiction.”

There was more than one style of magic. Magic theories have been created in different times and places, and there was also a difference in how spells were cast.

And Nana's duty was to keep people from casting magic for private use. More precisely, her duty was to keep people from her own country from casting magic for private use. It was also her duty to stop anyone who would use magic to hurt others, regardless of style.

Because of that, the people who weren't abusing magic, but instead were using it for private use in a different style fell into a grey zone. And if Nana didn't sense any danger, she didn't have any obligation to report them.

“Hmm, isn't that great, Nana-chan.”

“Eh?”

That might be true. I probably wish for a world where magic and people can coexist like that…

Nana wouldn't forget what she had experienced today. This experience would without a doubt be of great help to her in her future fights.

“That's true. I think I'm happy. But I can't get carried away. Our investigation has gone back to square one after all.”

Nana said as she erased her smile and showed a serious expression.

She was currently trying to resolve an incident involving magic that had occurred nearby. She was happy having met the mysterious magician, but her investigation having been sent back to square one wasn't good. And if they couldn't resolve it quickly, it might have a bad effect on the magician she had just met. Nana wanted to solve this case as fast as possible.

The Lost Tribe

The Lost Tribe

“I hope Soutarou-san and that child are alright…”

At the same time as Nana's expression changed, Kanae looked towards the city at the base of the mountain. Far away in the direction she was looking was a large estate. In it was her husband and daughter. Kanae's worried look was aimed at the two of them.

Kanae's husband and daughter were actually victims in the case that Nana was investigating. More accurately speaking, her daughter was a victim, and her husband was using his own body to keep her alive. That's why Kanae was cooperating with Nana and urgently trying to solve the case.

Kanae's husband, Soutarou, was the heir to an old shrine. Kanae herself had been taking archery lessons in a grounds annexed to the shrine. It was there that she met her husband, and they eventually got married. Their daughter was born with a very high spiritual energy thanks to the husband’s lineage.

With the age of science, even the oldest shrines had forgotten about the methods to control spiritual energy. That's why the girl was completely normal, regardless of her dense spiritual energy. But to people who abused magic, people who had a lot of spiritual energy were quite useful. They could be used as catalysts for spells or as sacrifices for evil demons.

Kanae's daughter had been kidnapped by the evil magician and used in a magical ritual. Fortunately, Nana had quickly saved her, but because of the ritual she was losing a large amount of spiritual energy even now, and her life was in danger if left alone. So Nana used magic to connect the daughter and the husband. Since Kanae's husband had a lot of spiritual energy himself, it allowed him to protect his daughter for the time being. Having bought some time, Kanae teamed up with Nana and the two of them chased after the magician. Their goal was of course to defeat the magician and end the ritual, and save Kanae's daughter and husband.

“Let's hurry. Kanae-san, put away the bow. We're moving out.”

“Okay. Where to next?”

“To the river up ahead. It's slight, but the nature’s magic is distorted over there.”

“Then let's go back to the car, it'll be faster that way.”

“Yes.”

The two of them nodded and vanished in the darkness.

The Lost Tribe

Part 2

While Nana and Kanae's hunt for the criminal continued, the criminal appeared somewhere neither of them had expected. The criminal was in a country far beneath the surface.

“Certainly, the crest on that plate, though slightly distorted, is the same as the one recorded on this old document. They wouldn't be this similar by chance.”

“To be more accurate, it's most likely the crest on the old document is the one that has been distorted. This stone plate was created at the same time, so it's been preserved to a greater extent.”

“So the accuracy of this manuscript has fallen while it was being handed down over the generations… that sounds possible.”

The criminal that Nana and Kanae were looking for was a woman in her late teens or early twenties, wearing an indigo outfit and holding a large cane. She was currently speaking to two men. The men were wearing outfits resembling Japanese clothes which were made using high quality cloth and thread. Their clothes showed that they held quite a high status.

“The lost seventh tribe… to think they actually existed, and that they prosper even now…”

“That goes both ways. To think I would be able to find a clue to the legendary native land in a place like this.”

The three were talking while comparing the stone plate and old document. The woman brought the plate, while the men had brought the old document. The men had invited her over so that they could talk. They were currently in one of the men's, Shijima Tayuma's, mansion. The Shijima family's mansion had the design of an old Japanese house, but it was well maintained and beautiful. One could tell that Tayuma was of high status just by looking at it. By the way, the other man was from a family that had served the Shijima family for generations. He was the one who had found the girl in indigo and brought her to Tayuma.

The Shijima family's mansion was inside a gigantic cave located underneath Harukaze city. Making good use of this space, a city had been constructed inside the cave, holding a population of over ten thousand. However, 10,000 was quite small considering the scale of the city. In the past, several tens of thousands of People of the Earth had lived here, but they were now in decline.

Since ancient times past, the People of the Earth had been far more advanced than the people on the surface, and they were very proud of their civilization. However, as the surface became modernized, the technological advantage had begun to shrink. In the latter half of the 20th century, while the people on the surface didn't have anything that can be compared to their devices that relied on spiritual energy, when it came to general life, they were practically equal to the underground people.

With the difference in general life eliminated, what occurred was not a problem of civilization, but a problem of culture. The underground civilization was indeed excellent, but its culture wasn't. In the end, they were just some tens of thousands of people that had passed their culture through the generations. They were no match for Japan's culture created by a population of over 100 million. The People of the Earth began admiring the surface as they experienced art and music, followed by amusement like books and movies, and eventually even food. What dealt the final blow was TV broadcasting that started on the surface.

Once TV broadcasts began on the surface, TV's were introduced to the underground as well. Because of this, the surface's culture began rapidly spreading through the underground. As a result, the admiration for the surface grew even more and underground people began leaving

for the surface at an explosive rate. In just a few decades, the People of the Earth had lost the majority of its people.

On top of that, there was yet another contributing cause for the People of the Earth's decline, and that was the exhaustion of resources. The People of the Earth had dug up their surroundings and gotten resources that way, but they were unable to meet the massive increase in demand since the 20th century. They were currently tunneling to far away regions and obtaining resources there, but they would eventually reach their limit, and they still hadn't found the means to avoid it.

The underground had scarce resources and a dark future.

Meanwhile, the surface had a bright future with its developed cultures of all kinds.

It was clear to anyone that the People of the Earth would eventually meet their demise. The response to their situation was divided into two different opinions. In the bigger picture, one could say they had the same opinion, as they both suggested that the People of the Earth move to the surface. But their methods were the opposite. One side wanted to secretly and peacefully move to the surface, while the other side wanted to invade the surface using military force.

The faction that called for peace was led by the current chief, Kurano Daiha. The surface's prosperity and the underground's rapid decline was obvious. However, they couldn't just sit around and wait for their demise. So they would slowly but surely move to the surface, and without the surface dwellers catching on, they would expand their territory and eventually establish a city for the People of the Earth.

Those who collided with this conservative faction and called for a military invasion of the surface was the radical faction with their extreme opinions. The current head of the Shijima family, Shijima Tayuma, was a member of this radical faction. The People of the Earth lived on the surface in the past, but they had retreated underground after the surface dwellers' ancestors had deprived them of their living space. The radical faction felt like they didn't need to be considerate when returning to the surface. They should just use force to secure their territory.

Of course, it would normally be hard for a civilization of around 10,000 to fight against surface dwellers. However, they had spiritual energy weapons, their ace in the hole. Weapons relying on spiritual energy certainly overwhelmed standard weapons in performance. It might be possible to prevail if they could mass produce the weapons.

The radical faction insisted on using force to invade while their weaponry was still superior.

“She holds the power spoken of in lore. And since she is knowledgeable about the surface, she should be suitable to deal with Kurano's daughter.”

“I see… Since she's from that forgotten tribe, and with those techniques… We won't have to worry about being suspected, and we don't have to borrow help from the surface dwellers… Fufufu, I like it.”

Tayuma was a very prideful man; he simply couldn't stand the conservative faction's stance of having the surface dwellers accept them. He was always on the lookout for ways to reduce the conservative faction's influence. That was when he received word that the Kurano family's daughter had gone up to the surface.

If the chief's daughter was murdered by the surface dwellers, the People of the Earth would surely never forgive them. And as a result, the radical faction would have an easier time getting their way. With that in mind, Tayuma plotted to assassinate the chief's daughter. However, Tayuma couldn't personally head to the surface because of the law. If he headed to the surface after completing the necessary procedures, he would be suspected even if there was no proof. Because of that, he had to summon an assassin from somewhere else, but because of his pride,

he didn't want to use surface dwellers. That was when the legendary tribe, that which was described only in lore and that Tayuma himself doubted existed, came into play.

According to the People of the Earth's myths, they were originally castaways who had come from another land. Chased away from their homeland, they ended up in ancient Japan. However, on their way there, the seventh tribe that was said to hold mysterious powers had been separated from the rest. And now, someone who claimed to be from that seventh tribe, a woman wearing indigo colored clothes, had appeared in front of Tayuma. By using her, Tayuma's pride wouldn't be injured as they were originally allies. And since the seventh's tribe very existence was under question, they were practically the same as a ghost to the other People of the Earth. There was no fear of Tayuma being suspected.

“I've had an interest in new techniques my brothers of the different tribes have made. Let us combine our powers for both of our profit and for the tribe's prosperity.”

“For the tribe's prosperity you say… I like you! Soldier from the lost tribe, what is your name?”

“It's Maya. In your style… my name as a soldier would be Dark Navy.”

The woman called Maya, dressed in indigo colored clothes, introduced herself as Dark Navy and smiled at Tayuma and the other man. However, in contrast to her friendly smile, she looked at the men with the scorn in her mind.

Dealing with the prideful is so easy, all you have to do is inflate their ego. Well, that's all the better for me, but I don't want to be involved if this man falls. It might be better to pull out once I've completely my objective…

Maya's objective was the information and technology that the People of the Earth held. Maya and the others might find information from the People of the Earth's old documents that would give them an advantage in their battle. And since Maya was a magician specialized in mind manipulation, she was very interested in the spiritual energy technology that the People of the Earth used. For example, she would love to get her hands on something like a capacitor that could temporarily store the spirit's power. That would be the first step to turn magic into a general weapon.

However, the People of the Earth weren't just going to hand over old documents or technology because she said she wanted it. They were top secrets that only the people of the highest positions could get their hands on.

That was when Maya set her eyes on Tayuma. He was a genuine People of the Earth supremacist, and was easy to control. By stroking his pride, he would easily hand over the necessary information and technology. The problem was that Tayuma's position was in an uncertain place. That's why Maya didn't want to have a long-term association with him, since she didn't want to get involved if he ever were to fail.

“So, who do I need to kill?”

With a serious expression, Maya requested that Tayuma continued speaking. Regardless of her true intentions, there would be no problem with creating a friendly relationship between her and Tayuma for now. She hid her intentions and dealt with the men in a as friendly manner as possible.

“This girl. She is the Kurano family's lone daughter, and has gone up to the surface for certain reasons. Her guard should be lowered, and she will be easy to kill.”

Tayuma picked up a photo from his desk and gave it to Maya. On it was a girl who had only just turned six years old. She was the daughter of the conservative faction's leader and the chief for the People of the Earth, Kurano Daiha.

“The daughter of the conservative faction was it? …Is the goal to turn the conservative tribes against the surface after killing this daughter of his?”

“Indeed, indigo soldier. That's correct.”

“If the goal is to break down the conservative faction, it would be best if it didn't look like an accident, would it? Do you have any suggestions for how to kill her?”

“I'll leave that to you. Since you can understand that much, just do it in whatever way is easiest for you.”

Hearing Maya's answer, Tayuma's expression distorted into a satisfied smile. Her answer showed that she had seen through his intentions, and had convinced him of his success. Because of that, his smile was very cruel and ugly.

There were several methods to reduce the conservative faction's influence, but having a conservative member be murdered by the people on the surface would produce the fastest results. Even more so if the victim was a young girl. That's why Tayuma wanted it to be clear that the girl hadn't been involved in an accident, but rather that someone had intended to murder her.

The ideal would have been if the government on the surface, knowing she was from the underground, tortured and killed her to extract information. Creating such an ideal condition would be difficult, but if something similar to it were to happen, it would surely make the conservative faction's stance waver. Currently, the majority supported the conservatives, and the plan to peacefully create a base on the surface was very likely to be turned into a reality. However, if the chief's daughter was disposed of, the conservative faction would lose their momentum, allowing the radical faction to gather influence. This assassination plan was Tayuma's move to turn the tables on the conservatives.

“Okay. Then I'll do it the way that is most convenient for me.”

Maya began thinking about how to deal with her target.

Hmm… maybe I should use this girl as a ritual sacrifice as well… as long as I make it look like it was done by the police or the Self Defense Forces… and if that's too hard, maybe I'll pin it on some cult?

Maya herself wasn't too fond of the act of murder. So if she had to kill someone, she wanted to make the most of their death. The idea was to use her target as a catalyst for magic, or also known as a sacrifice. In other words, the same as she had done with Kanae's daughter.

Kanae's daughter was still alive because Nana had saved her before the ritual was complete, but normally, since a person's life force was drained from the ritual, once it ended, you would have an uninjured corpse. After that, she only needed to make it look like her target had been murdered. She could pin it on the government or on a cult located in the region. Both of them would make the People of the Earth question the safety of the region.

Having thought of all that, Maya was satisfied and switched to the next topic.

“And, will you accept my demands?”

The new topic was regarding the reward.

“Of course. I will prepare what you ask for. Take a spiritual energy capacitor with you as upfront payment. I will prepare a transcript of the old documents, so come get it when the job is finished. I will present you with the other spiritual energy equipment at that time as well.”

Maya demanded some of the spiritual energy technology and transcripts of the old documents as her reward for the job. Since Tayuma supported a military invasion, he was influential in the

spiritual energy weapon research department. He was capable of selling surplus parts illegally. The situation was similar when it came to the old documents. And since Tayuma valued his relationship with the legendary tribe that Maya had come from, he had no hesitation in offering those.

“That's good. Then I'll get on my job right away.”

“Please do. I will await your return.”

Thus, both parties reached an agreement. Their intentions were completely different, and the same held true for the feelings regarding one another and their ultimate goals. Despite that, the smile both of them showed at this time had the same kind of darkness behind it.

A Grown-Up Date

Part 1

When Kii woke up today, she rushed towards the kitchen and began talking to Koutarou about what had happened last night while he was preparing breakfast.

“Why was Onii-chan asleep when mom came…? Geez.”

“Sorry, I've been a bit tired recently.”

“Mom wanted to meet you when I told her about you.”

“It's a shame I was asleep. I'll make sure to at least greet her if she comes by again.”

“She can't come often, but she said she would come again. So I'm sure you'll meet her.”

“I'm a terrible sleeper, so make sure you wake me up me when she does, okay?”

“Okay! I will!”

Kii had believed yesterday's events to be reality, rather than a dream. Of course, Koutarou never pointed that out. She would eventually understand it by herself that as she grew up.

This is like telling someone Santa Claus is real…

There were plenty of times when one would be better off saying that something existed, regardless of if really did or not. Kii's mother was one such thing. That was how Koutarou felt, and he continued preparing the breakfast while listening to Kii's story, accepting that fact as truth.

“So what did you tell your mom about me?”

“I said you were good at cooking.”

“I'm not that good though.”

“You are. Kii knows. Fufufu.”

Kii had been talking cheerfully ever since she came flying into the kitchen. She was happy that she had met her mother and that she had someone to talk to about it. She was also happy that that someone was Koutarou. But she couldn’t help but feel a little sad that she couldn't tell her father. Her complex emotions regarding her father were beginning to sort themselves out after meeting with her mother.

“When I told her more things about you, she said that I should give you that.”

“What is 'that?'”

“Ehehehe… that's a secret♪”

“Another one, huh. You have plenty of secrets.”

“Maybe. But, I'll tell you everything sooner or later. Fufufufu.”

“Then I'll look forward to it.”

Kii was sitting on a chair in the kitchen, and with both of her elbows on the table, she gazed at Koutarou's back as he continued cooking. Her expression shone with joy. Yesterday's events had completely revived her original personality.

This is what children should be like…

Even though he couldn't directly see her, the sound of her voice and the tapping when her feet hit the floor as she swung her legs let him know how she must have appeared like. Thanks to that, Koutarou was also in a cheerful mood.

A Grown-Up Date

A Grown-Up Date

Part 2

Some time had passed after that; Koutarou had finished cooking and was now placing the breakfast on the table. Still swinging her legs, Kii called out to Koutarou.

“By the way, Onii-chan?”

“Yes?”

Koutarou stopped what he was doing and looked at Kii. That was when he noticed that the atmosphere around her was a little different from normal. Her cheeks were lightly blushed and her smile was reserved.

“Uhm, Uhm, you see…”

“Just go ahead and say it.”

Kii seemed to be hesitating so Koutarou smiled and urged her on ahead.

“Y-You see? If you're not too busy… uhm, would you go on a date with Kii?”

“A date?”

“Y-yeah…”

Kii blushed even more, and she very lightly nodded.

I see, so that's how it is…

Koutarou realized why Kii was blushing. The word date was embarrassing for her, but she held admiration for the word, so she wanted to use it. One could say that though she was young, Kii was still a girl.

“You see, I made a promised with mom! I promised that I would go see the Kabutonga movie and tell her about it! S-So, uhm…”

Kii hurriedly explained the situation, and Koutarou found her different-from-normal appearance to be heartwarming.

“But… if Onii-chan is too busy, that's okay…”

But as she was reaching the end, she lost momentum. At the same time, she looked up at Koutarou with longing eyes. That was when Koutarou noticed that she was worried about something else as well.

I see… not only is the word date embarrassing for her, but she's always worried about my circumstances…

Yesterday, Kii's mind had been too occupied with her fight with her father and the feelings for her mother that she hadn't considered that she might be causing any problems for Koutarou. However, once the night had passed, she had been able to meet with her mother and had begun to settle down. Because of that, she began thinking about what her presence might mean for Koutarou; she didn't want to cause him any troubles. That's why she had put it like that. Understanding that, Koutarou nodded at her words.

“Alright, then let's go on a date.”

“Really!? Are you sure!?”

Upon hearing Koutarou's answer, Kii expression instantly turned into that of a bright, childish smile.

That's it, a good girl like you should act like a child, Kii-chan…

A Grown-Up Date

Since Koutarou had already promised to take her to the movie, he had no reason to refuse. He also felt like fulfilling anything Kii wished for right now. It was a natural reaction for people to listen more to considerate children, rather than reckless ones.

“It's fine. But I have something to do today, so I hope tomorrow is okay with you.”

Koutarou had to pawn the platinum he had gotten from Clan and buy food and miscellaneous goods. Since Clan couldn't leave the laboratory, that was his job.

“Then I will help you!”

Kii offered her help, thinking that if Koutarou would take her on a date tomorrow, it was only obvious for her to work today.

“Thank you, Kii-chan.”

In reality, there wasn't a lot that Kii could do. But since Koutarou believed that her willingness to help was important, he honestly thanked her and patted her head.

“Fufufu, alright! Tomorrow's a date!”

“Even if you say that, I don't have a lot of experience with going out to play with girls, so don't get your hopes up.”

“Ehehehe, it doesn't have to be a grown-up date. That's because you don't do what I like doing on a grown-up date.”

Unlike his best friend, Kenji, Koutarou had almost no experience with going on dates with girls. That's why he believed that the date might not turn out the way Kii was expecting.

However, Kii wasn't expecting what she called a grown-up date. Though she wanted to use the word date, she was fine with going to play in a park, or eating ice cream.

“If it's something childish, you can leave it to me.”

“Onii-chan and I should just have fun.”

“…That's quite a grown-up idea.”

Koutarou reached out and patted Kii's head again. And in response, she happily smiled.

“So it is a grown-up date?”

“It's a mental attitude thing.”

The two laughed together.

Thus, Koutarou and Kii promised to go out and play.

A Grown-Up Date

Part 3

After exchanging the platinum for money at a pawn shop, Koutarou and Kii went shopping.

Food and various other goods; there was a lot of things he wanted to gather. After the next time freeze, Koutarou would be getting off the Cradle, but Clan would remain. And since Clan couldn't move herself, he had to make those preparations for her. He also believed it was best to be prepared in case anything irregular were to happen. After his long time on the battlefield in Forthorthe, Koutarou had acquired such carefulness.

Because of that, Koutarou and Kii were walking around large supermarkets and department stores. Eventually the acquired goods took up about as much space as three cardboard boxes and a cart was needed to move it around. By the time they were done shopping, both Koutarou and Kii were exhausted.

“Good work.”

“Fueee~~~, we bought so much~~~”

The two sat down on a bench in a park and took a break. After this, they still needed to push the cart all the way to the Cradle. Since the Cradle was in the middle of a mountain, it would be quite a tough job. They decided to take a little break before that.

“Here, Kii-chan. You can open it.”

“Really!?”

Koutarou pulled out a wrapped candy from the cart. After receiving it, Kii put a big smile on her face. Koutarou looked at her smile in his peripheral vision while pulling out two plastic bottles so that they would have something to drink.

“I hope something good comes out…”

Kii carefully unwrapped the candy. The candy was a snack from her favorite Kabutonga series which also contained a trading card with one of the characters on it. Koutarou had noticed that Kii was staring at this particular candy earlier, and so he had bought it for her.

“Aww, it was just King Scarab…”

After a quick glance on the bonus card, Kii slightly dropped her shoulders. The card she had gotten was pictured one of the villains, and had a malicious looking background color. Kii wanted Kabutonga, or at least another hero. Since she had built her hopes up, her disappointment was much bigger than she showed.

“Let's get another one on our way back.”

Seeing Kii drop her shoulders, Koutarou felt bad for her. He called out to Kii while handing her a juice bottle.

He still had a lot of the money he had gotten from exchanging the platinum. He had plenty to spare to buy some candy, so he suggested that they stop by a nearby convenience store on the way back and buy another one.

“No, that's okay. I can't get another one until I finish this candy.”

Kii's smile returned and she brought the snack to her mouth. She loved this taste. But with that said, she wouldn't be able to finish off two or three. She was sad about the card, but she was going to endure it.

She should just be more childish when it comes to things like that…

Kii was never very selfish., and that made Koutarou want to do something for her. Simply put, he wanted to see her smile.

A Grown-Up Date

Huh? Now that I think about it, this card…

Peeking at the card together with Kii, Koutarou realized that he had seen its layout before. Though the color was wrong, he had seen the frame's drawing style and the flavor text's design before.

“I see!”

“What is it, Onii-chan?”

“Just wait a minute, Kii-chan, I have something nice for you.”

Koutarou smiled at Kii and put his hand into the pocket on his chest.

“What?”

“Here, look.”

Koutarou pulled out what was in his pocket and showed it to Kii.

“It's Kabutonga!”

The next moment, Kii's eyes opened up as wide as possible. What she was looking at was a trading card. It depicted her beloved Kabutonga, and what's more, it was a rare card with a metallic sheen.

“Wow, how did you get this!?”

“I got it a while back ago.”

It was the card that Koutarou had used as a bookmark during the play. It was a recreation of the cards available in this age, as a promotion for the re-showing of the Kabutonga movie. As such, it had the same design as the cards of this era.

“I'll give it to you, Kii-chan.”

“Really!? It's a sparkling card you know!?”

“Yeah. You wanted one, right?”

Koutarou was planning on giving the card to Kii. It was hard for him to throw it away because of the way he had gotten it. So handing it over to someone who needed it was best.

“Yes! Thank you, Onii-chan!”

Kii took the card from Koutarou and held it above her head with both hands. It was a gesture as if she was trying to see through it using the sunlight, but of course, since the card was so thick she couldn't see anything. It was simply an expression of her joy.

“Alright! It's a sparkling Kabutonga!”

“Make sure you take good care of it.”

“Yeah, of course!”

Truth be told, it was a bonus he had gotten when buying a pamphlet, and everyone who bought the pamphlet got the same card. However, there was no need to tell her that. Like the opposite of Santa Claus, it is sometimes good to not point out the existence of something.

That's right. If we go to the amusement park, we might be able to see the Kabutonga movie…

Thanks to the card, Koutarou remembered the movie theater in the amusement park. He had been planning on taking Kii to the amusement park tomorrow, so if things went well they might be able to go see the movie at the same time.

“Nfufu, I'll make sure to write my name on it later!”

A Grown-Up Date

Kii was in her own world as she looked at the card. Koutarou felt like he wanted to see her childish appearance even more as he looked at her.

I'll check it out when we get to the amusement park tomorrow…

That's why he quietly made up his mind as he looked at Kii who was in high spirits.

A Grown-Up Date

Part 4

Up until now, Koutarou had only had one date-like experience. Using that experience as reference, he decided on what to do today. In the morning, they would take a stroll through the park. Then, after eating lunch at a restaurant near the station, they would travel by train in the afternoon to the zoo and amusement park.

Just like Koutarou had hoped, the Kabutonga movie was being played in the amusement park's movie theater. Though the seating capacity in the theater was limited, thanks to it being an amusement park, it had a rather large-scale promotion where goods were sold and presents were given to movie watchers, so it was filled with stuff that Kii would love.

"Wow… amazing…"

Kii ran in and out of the movie theater, completely fascinated with the sights she saw. There was so much that she didn't want to overlook, such as the large sign for the movie, information of presents and more.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Kii-chan. Here's a pamphlet."

"Thank you, Onii-chan!"

However, her interest soon switched over to the ticket and pamphlet that Koutarou had bought. This pamphlet was also something only for this amusement park, and the deluxe edition had a bonus small figure attached to it.

"Alright!"

After receiving the pamphlet from Koutarou, Kii flipped through the pages with her eyes opened wide.

"You're better off not looking any further."

"Eh? Why?"

Hearing Koutarou's warning, Kii stopped flipping through the pages. Koutarou smiled at her and pointed at the pamphlet.

"This spoils part of the story. So if you look at it first, you'll not enjoy the movie as much."

"Oh, I see! Then I'll look in it later!"

Kii shut the pamphlet without hesitation, and showed a bright smile.

"Ehehehe~"

And when Koutarou patted her on the head, she happily narrowed her eyes. She then began gazing at the figure she had gotten.

"Aren't you glad you came?"

"Yeah!"

Kii was in a very cheerful mood today. She had seen so many things for the first time since this morning, and the movie she had been dying to see was about to start. But what made her the happiest was that someone was spending that time together with her. That person understood her feelings and treasured her, so her happiness and joy increased tenfold.

Everyone should just come over here and make friends with the people. Just like me and Onii-chan…

Recently, the people around Kii had been talking about complicated things. They were arguing if they should be getting along with the people in Harukaze city or not. That was too complicated

of a topic for a six-year-old, but she now understood one thing: getting along with Koutarou was very fun. Because of that, she couldn't help but think of the adults arguing as strange.

Kabutonga says so too. Bravery comes from people supporting each other. When I grow up, I'll support Onii-chan!

That kind of feeling began budding in her small chest. It was something that she had been thinking about ever since yesterday.

Koutarou had treated a complete stranger like her well. But should she just rely on him? Like Kabutonga said, Kii wanted to do something for Koutarou as well. That was the kind of thoughts she had started to have.

On the other hand, Kii had begun understanding her own immaturity. She was still a child, and she didn't have the power to be of help. That's why she prayed that she would become a fine adult and be able to support Koutarou.

In other words, though young, Kii had fallen in love. Because of her age she still hadn't realized it, but this was her first love.

A Grown-Up Date

Part 5

After the movie had ended, the two began riding the attractions in the amusement park. Since it was almost evening, Koutarou began worrying about Kii's stamina, but she was full of energy even now. Kii had gotten really pumped up when she watched the movie, and she had been that way ever since.

“Uwaaa…”

Up close, the Ferris wheel was very big. From a six-year-old's point of view, though it didn't reach the sky, it was still huge. Kii spaced out as she stared up at the Ferris wheel.

“Kii-chan.”

Koutarou called for Kii since it was their turn to get on. The person in charge opened the door and waited for Koutarou and Kii. Since they couldn't ride until Kii got there, Koutarou and the clerk had wry smiles.

“I'm sorry, I'll be right there!”

Finally returning to herself after hearing her name, Kii began running towards Koutarou. And when she reached him, she firmly grasped his hand.

“Eii!”

Even though she caught up to Koutarou she didn't slow down. While holding onto his hand, she jumped into the gondola.

“That's dangerous.”

“Ehehe, sorry.”

As if pulled in by Kii, Koutarou entered the gondola as well and began scolding her. While she apologized, she smiled and didn't show any signs of reflecting on what she had done. Meanwhile the clerk closed the gondola’s door and the gondola rose without making a sound.

“If you do it again, I'll punish you.”

“Ehehe, it will be fine. When we meet again, Kii will probably be more adult.”

“Eh?”

“I met with mom, and I got to see the movie. Since I promised it's almost time to go home.”

“I see, that's true…”

Koutarou had forgotten part ways through, but Kii was in the middle of running away from home. And she had promised to go home after finding her mother and seeing the movie.

“But I think everyone is going to be very angry. So… I don't think I can see Onii-chan for a while.”

Kii was aware that she had caused problems for a lot of people. It would be hard for her to return for a while, that was why she was doing her best to enjoy today.

“That's great. I'm glad you've made up your mind.”

Koutarou, who understood Kii's feelings, stopped scolding her. She already understood everything.

“I heard on the TV that travelling on your own makes you grow up.”

“Haha, you're not on your own though.”

“Yeah. I only travelled on my own for a little while. Hehehe.”

A Grown-Up Date

A few hours after running away from home, she had met Koutarou. And today was the third day. Though it had only been a few days, she had grown up a little and experienced her first love. These three days had become her treasure.

“Alright! With that out of the way, let's enjoy today to our fullest!”

“Yeah!”

Kii would go home and Koutarou would go to sleep for ten years. Though it was sad, they would probably never meet again. With that in mind, Koutarou believed that in that case, they probably wouldn't be punished for having as much fun as possible during their last time together.

“Kii-chan, what do you want to ride next?”

“Uhm…”

The gondola the two were on was just about to reach the top. The setting sun's light lit up Kii's expression as she was looking outside the window. And that gave her cheerful smile a gentle atmosphere.

Ah…

Looking at Kii's profile, Koutarou saw the face of another person from his memories overlapping with Kii's.

“I've decided! Onii-chan, let's ride on that next!”

However, when Kii cheerfully pointed at something, the overlapping face of the other person vanished without a trace left. Because of that, he couldn't confirm just who that was.

“That thing spinning round and round and zooming by!”

“The roller coaster huh. That sounds good, let's ride that next.”

However, Koutarou didn't let that bother him. Right now, rather than being concerned about who Kii looked like, he should be valuing his time with Kii.

After getting off the Ferris wheel, the two walked towards the roller coaster, side by side. The setting sun lit them up and created long shadows. Their surroundings were wrapped in the red light and it was almost as if it was burning.'

“Hey, Onii-chan.”

Kii reached her hand out to Koutarou, and realizing what she wanted, he reached his hand out to her as well.

“Hehehe.”

Kii took Koutarou's hand and they wrapped their fingers around each other’s hand. And they continued walking towards the roller coaster while holding hands.

“Onii-chan.”

When Kii began speaking, she strongly squeezed Koutarou's hand. Because of that, though vague, Koutarou understood that she was about to say something important.

“When I come home, I will apologize to dad.”

“Why do you feel that way?”

Kii had run away from home because their feelings had missed one another. Koutarou wanted to know why her feelings had changed.

“I actually shouldn't have run away from home… Instead, I believe I should have held hands with dad.”

A Grown-Up Date

“Hmm…”

Instead of answering, Koutarou squeezed Kii's hand back. He felt like that was the best way to convey his feelings.

“I also think I've made him worry. That's why I am going to apologize to dad.”

“That's good. I'm sure he'll be really mad, but you should get along with your dad.”

“Yeah.”

Kii nodded and smiled. She was happy that Koutarou had understood.

“But I also think it's a good thing that I ran away from home.”

“It's not good.”

“Yeah. It's not good, but, how can I say it…”

Kii smiled wryly and put her hand on her cheek and began thinking. However, she quickly began to smile again and called out to Koutarou.

“That's right. I became friends with Onii-chan, right? That's not bad.”

“We probably wouldn't have met if you didn't run away from home.”

Koutarou smiled and dropped his shoulders a little at the same time.

When he had first met Kii, he had been worried about what would happen next, but in the end everything worked out. He became friends with her, the police hadn't gotten involved, and she was going to go back home.

Like Kii had said, it wasn't a bad end.

“Right?”

“Well, the balance is a little bad.”

“You're strict.”

“That's what the adult world is like.”

“I think you're still a kid too, Onii-chan.”

“Alright, then it's a good thing you ran away from home.”

“Ahahaha.”

As the two laughed, they reached the entrance to the roller coaster.

At that time, a coaster passed by them.

The top of the roller coaster was at around 70 meters, and from that point. there was a 65-meter free fall. At this moment, it was the largest roller coaster in the country, and its speed was terrific.

“Amazing…”

Kii looked at the coaster passing by her at extreme speed with her eyes opened wide. Her impression of the roller coaster was completely different from when she had seen it from the Ferris wheel.

“Are you scared?”

“Nope. I wanna ride it!”

However, Kii's eyes weren't open wide because of fear, but because she had been surprised by the speed. Getting a sense of the speed up close and personal, her interest piqued.

A Grown-Up Date

“Let's go!”

Her eyes were sparkling as she excitedly grabbed Koutarou and passed through the entrance to the roller coaster.

This roller coaster had been made very recently, and since it was the largest in the country, it had a long line during the weekends. However, since today was a weekday, there was no long line and they didn't have to wait long.

“Excuse me, may I have a minute?”

Before the two reached the terminal they were stopped by a clerk.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I am very sorry, but this lady cannot get on the ride.”

The clerk said to Koutarou.

“Eeee~~~h!? Why~~~!?”

Hearing that she wouldn't be allowed to ride all of a sudden, Kii was upset. She pressed up to the clerk and began protesting while making large gestures.

“Kii won't do anything dangerous! I'll sit still in the ride, okay!?”

A Grown-Up Date

A Grown-Up Date

“N-No, it's not that you are in the wrong…”

Pressured by Kii's protest, the clerk pointed to a nearby signboard.

“This roller coaster does not have the safety measures to accommodate someone of your height. If you were to ride on the roller coaster, you might be thrown out of your seat.”

This was written on the signboard that the clerk had pointed at.

'To ride on this attraction you need to be at least 140 centimeters'

Kii had only recently grown past 110 centimeters, so she was a whole 30 centimeters shorter than what was shown on the signboard.

Roller coasters normally had a safety bar that lowered on top of the passengers and secured their bodies. However, Kii was too small and a gap would form in that safety measure. With a gap, there was a high chance that Kii would be thrown off the roller coaster during curves of free falls. And of course, the clerk couldn't allow her to get on the ride.

“I am truly sorry, but could you please give up on boarding this attraction?”

“B-But…”

Disappointed, Kii dropped her shoulders. Kii understood the reasons and didn't complain any more. However, since she had gotten her hopes up, she was greatly disappointed and was on the verge of crying.

“I can’t grow big all of a sudden!”

“That's too bad.”

“Aauuu~~”

“I am very sorry, we will await your arrival next time.”

The two separated from the clerk and returned down the path they had come. During that time, they passed by people who were going to ride on the roller coaster. As they walked, Kii glanced at the people they passed by with envy.

How do I put it, it's like…

Looking at Kii all depressed, Koutarou felt bad for her, but at the same time it was heartwarming. It was a complex emotion. He felt bad for her since she didn't get to ride the roller coaster, but when he looked at her now he felt nostalgic.

“…It's unfair that grown-ups get to have all the fun… geez…”

The feelings of 'why is it only the adults' was something that Koutarou understood very well. When he was young, he had felt the same way on many occasions. When he looked at Kii, it was like he was looking at himself from that time, and he was overcome with a heartwarming feeling. Because of that, although he felt bad for her, a smile appeared on his face.

“You'll become a grown-up soon too.”

“But I wanted to ride it today.”

Kii said that and squeezed on Koutarou's hand.

“…Together with Onii-chan…”

Kii was still looking at the roller coaster, filled with people waiting in line to get on. She wanted a memory of her and Koutarou riding it together. That's because she knew that it would be difficult for her to come back here with him again.

Really… she is such a good girl…

A Grown-Up Date

When Koutarou got a faint idea of what Kii was thinking, he felt like something was gripping at his chest. And he began thinking that he wanted to see her smile again.

“Then let's ride something that we can only ride today.”

Fortunately, he managed to find something that could comfort her right away. This was an amusement park, and there were plenty of things like that around.

“Only today?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Koutarou pointed at something when Kii looked up, still on the verge of crying. In the direction where he was pointing was a large merry-go-round.

“Why?”

When Kii saw the merry-go-round she rubbed her eyes and tilted her head in confusion. It didn't look like something that they could only ride today to her.

“If I'm not with a small girl like you, it's far too embarrassing for a guy like me to get on.”

“Ah!”

Kii looked like she understood. The merry-go-round was full of children and their parents. There were also young couples riding, but the men seemed to be uncomfortable. In the end, it was hard to ride without using children as an excuse.

“Onii-chan, you want to ride something like that?”

A slight smile appeared on Kii's lips. Seeing that, Koutarou gave her a large nod and a mischievous smile.

“Yeah. Can't I?”

“No, that's okay!”

After shaking her head once, Kii showed a big smile and her expression changed into a gentler one.

“…Are you just enduring the embarrassment for Kii's sake?”

“No. I want to ride it for myself. Isn't that horse cool?”

“Hmm. Then I'll leave it at that.”

Kii understood what Koutarou was thinking. She was a clever child after all.

“Despite my looks, I'm confident in my ability to ride horses.”

“I see. Then let's ride it together!”

And just like that, Kii didn't mind if she was riding the merry-go-round. What she was after wasn't the fact of having ridden the roller coaster.

A Grown-Up Date

Part 6

After playing until the sun set, Koutarou and Kii headed for home. They took a train to the city and headed for the mountain where the Cradle was on foot. It would only take about 30 minutes from the station to the Cradle.

“We're back…”

Holding hands with Koutarou, Kii looked at the mountain growing larger in front of her. Koutarou had fulfilled everything he had promised. Now it was her turn. It was finally time for her to go back home.

“I was never planning on returning home…”

“That's just how it is. You don't run away from home for long. After growing up a little, it usually ends.”

Excluding special cases involving things such as abuse, the reason for running away from home usually involves immaturity. In other words, running away from home usually ends when you grow up.

Kii had also grown up. She had run away because of the friction between her and her father after her mother's death. However, after calming down, she realized her own immaturity and forgave her father. She realized that she's not the only one in grief,and that her father was suffering too. As a result, she had considerably matured.

“I'm sorry for causing you trouble for several days, Onii-chan…”

“It's alright. I think it's a good thing that I met you.”

Koutarou believed it was a good thing that the two had met.

Kii was a very gentle girl. Though he had been troubled at first, he felt that they had now become friends.

And if she hadn't met Koutarou, what would have happened to Kii? Would she wander the city on her own? What then? Thinking about it like that, Koutarou believed it was a good thing to have met her.

What can I say… I get a strange feeling from this girl…

Koutarou had felt a sense of deja vu several times after meeting Kii. The face of a familiar person would sometimes overlap with hers. He had felt something similar back in Forthorthe, but this time it was even clearer.

“Oh and thank you for the card.”

Kii pulled out the metallic card and showed it to Koutarou.

“I made sure to write my name on it to not lose it. Look!”

Characters had been written on the card using a permanent marker. That was supposed to be Kii's name, but since she was a six year old, it only looked like scribbles.

“Ah…”

Deja vu.

That's impossible!? I know this card!?

Koutarou had seen a card like this before. In the past, he had seen a card with scribbles just like these. However that card was old and the metallic color had lost its sheen. As if ten years or more had passed.

A Grown-Up Date

Then, this girl is… no, wait, can such a coincidence really happen!? Isn't it just that the scribbles look similar!?

Koutarou was getting confused. If he were to believe his intuition, he would have to accept a hard-to-believe coincidence. Compared to that, he felt it was more natural for the scribbles to just look similar.

“Kii-chan… could your name be…”

He could just confirm her name. Doing that would make everything clear. If Kii was just a nickname, and her real name was something else, then…

“Could it be, Kiri—”

However, just as Koutarou was about to ask her name, a video billboard that had been installed on the outside of a nearby building caught his eye.

“The time is 6:06PM. Here is the weather report for today, April 16 1999. The skies will be clear over the entirety of Harukaze city—”

The moment he saw that large billboard, the date displayed there filled his head. What he had been thinking of before completely left his mind.

“I-Impossible. It's April 16, 1999!?”

“What's wrong, Onii-chan?”

Noticing that the atmosphere around Koutarou had changed, Kii looked up with a worried expression. And since he had a pale face, Kii squeezed his hand.

“Which means that the accident happens today!? And there's less than one hour!”

“Onii-chan what are you talking about!?”

Seeing how Koutarou was behaving, Kii sensed that something serious was happening. So her expression changed to a serious one.

“My mom will die soon!”

On April 16, 1999 Koutarou's mother died in an accident. It had happened, no, it will happen at 7PM. An event that would forever change Koutarou's life was about to occur in less than an hour.

The Heart's Balance

Part 1

Very soon, Koutarou's mother would die. Having realized that, he was frozen in place.

What should I do!?

During these three days, Koutarou had been secretly thinking about whether he should save his mother or not. If he saved his mother, he and Clan wouldn't be able to return to their own world. In that case, Koutarou would have brought it upon himself, but the same couldn't be said for Clan. Had this been Forthorthe, she wouldn't have minded since Clan was royalty, and she had the duty of protecting the lives of her citizens. However, Clan had nothing to do with the people on Earth. There was nothing logical about involving her. On top of that, Koutarou had made a promise with the invading girls, and he had sworn to himself. That said, he had a hard time just letting his own mother die.

Without being able to make a decision, that time slowly approached. But there was no time to hesitate. In less than an hour, Koutarou's mother would die, the time to make up his mind was now.

“I-I—”

But despite knowing that, Koutarou couldn't move.

In order for him to obtain a place of his own to return to, he would have to steal away Clan's. In other words, Koutarou saving his mother's life meant that he would steal Clan's life, for the sake of his own. Could something like that really be forgiven?

And what about the promise he had made ten years into the future? That's why he had so desperately struggled to return home.

That said, could he just abandon the people that he knew would die? Could letting someone he knew would die just pass away be forgiven? Especially so when it was his own mother.

The weights of conscience balancing inside Koutarou's heart perfectly cancelled each other out. They were both things that he didn't want to lose. And because of that he couldn't move.

“Let's hurry up and save her! Onii-chan!”

However, Kii began shaking up that balance.

Kii had just lost her mother, so she knew how Koutarou would feel if he didn't save her. And since she didn't want that to happen, she desperately appealed to him.

“It's your mom! You can't just let her be!”

“But, if I do that, something dangerous will happen to me and my friend! There will be people I can never meet again!”

“But you still need to go! If you don't, that friend will be hurt! They will think that they killed Onii-chan's mom!”

If Koutarou didn't save his mother, Clan would probably feel sorry. She would feel like he couldn't save his mother because she was with him. That truth would surely bind Clan, and the same would hold true for the invaders. Could that really be the best choice?

Kii didn't know who Koutarou's friend was, but if he didn't save his mother, she knew how that friend would feel. Because that's how she would feel.

“Let's save your mom and apologize to your friend! After that you can just protect your friend so that nothing dangerous happens to them! That's for the best!”

The Heart's Balance

“Kii-chan…”

Koutarou's heart was at a standstill. That was when Kii repeatedly hurled her own heart at him. And for each time she knocked up against him, her emotions were carved into Koutarou's heart. That gentle, warm emotion tipped the balance in his heart.

“I got it. Thank you, Kii-chan.”

Koutarou made up his mind.

There was no choice that wouldn't end with regret. In that case, Koutarou should carry the responsibility of that regret. Listening to Kii's desperate appeals, he finally made his resolution.

“Let's go save mom. I'll apologize to my friends later.”

While speaking to Kii, Koutarou thought of his friends that weren't with him.

Sorry, everyone… It doesn't look like I can fulfill our promise…

Koutarou had promised the invaders that they would make the play a success. He had also made an oath to himself that he would resolve the problems they carried. But now that he had decided to save his mother, he was about to all but lose the chance to do that, and that made him feel guilty.

I am very sorry, your highness… I even turned your offer down…

The same could be said regarding Alaia. When she had wished for Koutarou to remain in Forthorthe, he had rejected her, saying he had a promise and an oath to fulfill. But he was now about to turn his back on those. And that could be called a betrayal towards Alaia.

And Clan, I'm sorry for getting you involved in this. I'll protect you… so please forgive me…

In the past they had been enemies, but now they were friends. To Koutarou, Clan was as precious to him as the invading girls. She would probably be unhappy because of Koutarou. That's why he had to protect her from now on. That became his new oath.

Aware of all these circumstances, Koutarou decided to go save his mother. He believed this was the correct decision. However, he didn't have the conviction to call it such. The circumstances were different from when the village's water source had been poisoned. This time, history would almost certainly change.

However–

Even then, Koutarou couldn't close his eyes on the life that was to end in front of him. He couldn't let it go, knowing what would happen. That was neither justice nor knightly. It was Koutarou's weakness.

“That's right! That's the way, Onii-chan!”

Kii showed a gentle smile. She was happy to be of Koutarou's help. She was happy that she had been able to repay the favor, even if it was just a little.

“You don't have to do everything yourself! You can make mistakes! Because you're not Kabutonga, Onii-chan!”

Kii knew that Koutarou was just a very normal teenager. That he wasn't a superhero that could resolve everything. It was because Kii was here and that she had forgiven his weakness that Koutarou could move. Regardless of what happened now, the end would be far better than if he had just stood still. Koutarou had surely been saved by the young girl named Kii.

And that showed that the young but gentle girl had become a special person to Koutarou, just like the invaders and Clan.

Part 2

Koutarou clearly remembered the site of his mother's accident. He himself was there at the time, and after the accident he and his father had passed through several times. As such, Koutarou approached the site using the quickest route possible.

“I am sorry, Bertorion. I used Forthorthe's calendar, so it didn't properly translate to this world's calendar. I should have made the proper calculations and let you know.”

“So that's why…”

On their way to the site of the accident, Koutarou had used his bracelet to get in touch with Clan. According to Clan's calculation, the accident was supposed to take place a month later, so he wanted to know why it differed.

Clan had used the clock on board the Cradle and Forthorthe's calendar for her calculation. Though they were based off of the vibration frequency of gravitons, they originally used Forthorthe's revolution and rotation as its standard to measure time.

Forthorthe had roughly the same size and mass as Earth, and it was about as far away from it's star as Earth was from the sun. Because of that, their cycles revolution and rotation were practically the same. However, their cycles weren't exactly the same, and that created a slight margin for error.

That margin for error didn't affect minor calculations, but in major ones such as the passing of 2,000 years, it created a gap of about 40 days. In other words, this wasn't Clan's calculation miss, but because a different calendar had been used.

“I understand. Clan, I'm going to save my mom.”

“Do as you please.”

“I'm sorry for getting you involved in this. I'll properly take responsibility for it later.”

“I can't say I feel bad hearing that from a legendary knight.”

“Thank you, Clan.”

“Make sure you don't screw up. Fufufufu.”

In the end, Clan didn't so much as criticize Koutarou as she smiled. She had suspected that this might happen from the start and that this would be for the best. It was the reaction that Kii had imagined she would have.

I'm really sorry… thank you, Clan…

Koutarou thanked Clan and ended the communication. Waiting for Koutarou to finish speaking, Kii called out to him.

“O-Onii-chan, don't worry about me, g-go on ahead!”

Right now, Koutarou was matching Kii's speed as he ran. Believing it would be bad if Koutarou didn't make it in time because of that, she wanted him to go ahead of her.

“No, it's fine.”

However, Koutarou shook his head and spoke to Kii in a calm fashion.

“We'll have enough time if we keep going at this pace. It's not that far from here.”

“R-Really? Then that's fine.”

Relieved, Kii's expression eased up a little. Koutarou could easily run at their current speed, but the same wasn't true for Kii. Her breathing was so rough it was hard for her when she tried to smile.

“We could even stop for a moment on our way there.”

“Aha, I-I'll do my best so we won't have to do that, Onii-chan!”

Kii was exhausted after having spent the entire day playing. However, when she learned that Koutarou's mother was in danger, she did her best to be of help. Understanding that, Koutarou was grateful. Right now, people's emotions were more important than results to Koutarou.

“Kii-chan, we're turning on that corner.”

“Okay!”

Koutarou ran a little faster and guided Kii. They were going to leave the main street and enter an alley. That way would be faster to the site of the accident, and it would be easier to run with less people around. Since it was 6PM on a weekday, there were a lot of people on their way home filling up the main street.

“Once we get through here, we'll be right next to it!”

“Just a little more!”

Entering the alley, Koutarou slowed down to match Kii's pace again. They would be running in a straight line for a while, so there was no need to guide her. He lined up next to her and they ran through the dimly lit alley.

“…Hm?”

After Koutarou and Kii had run half of the straight route, several men and women appeared in front of them. They were headed the opposite way of Koutarou and Kii and the distance between the two groups shortened.

What's with these people…?

Normally, one would suspect they were passers-by using the alley. But their clothes, genders and ages were all over the place, and they had no common feature. But Koutarou could sense something abnormal about their presence. The intuition he had nurtured on the battlefield was warning him. Following his intuition, he noticed several strange things about the group.

Their expressions were feeble and pale. Their walking was awkward, as if they were puppets with their strings cut. Filled with doubt, Koutarou used the ability to see spiritual energy that he had gotten from Sanae and looked at them. He saw that the flow of their auras were oddly distorted. The aura from the neck and up wasn't properly cooperating with the aura of the rest of the body.

“Kii-chan, stop!”

Koutarou slowed down as he said that while grabbing Kii's arm to stop her. And after stopping himself, he glared at the people in front of him.

Could it be that these people are…

Koutarou unknowingly grasped hard with his right hand. He had seen auras distorted like this before: his friend, the fire dragon emperor, Alunaya had been in a similar state when it was being controlled by the evil magicians. At the time, he didn't know how dragons’ auras looked like, so he didn't pay much attention to it. Thinking back to it now, Alunaya's aura had been distorted like this.

The Heart's Balance

Since this was modern Japan, it was hard to believe that they were under the influence of magic. However, they might be under the influence of drugs, machines, hypnosis or something like that. And even if that wasn't the case, they weren't normal, so it was best to keep his guard up. With that in his mind, Koutarou stopped moving.

“Onii-chan?”

Koutarou was supposed to be in a hurry, but suddenly he had stopped and was showing a scary face. Kii still didn't understand what was going on, but seeing his appearance, she got anxious and squeezed Koutarou's hand.

“Those people… are probably enemies.”

“Enemies!? They're bad people!? Why!?”

“I don't know, but they aren't normal.”

“They're not normal?”

Kii took another look at the people in front of her after Koutarou pointed that out. When she did, she understood what he was saying. Even to her, their expressions and movements were strange.

“You're right. They seem, strange…”

“What are those people trying to do…”

Koutarou mumbled as he glared at the group. That was when the group spread out to block off the path in front of him. At the same time, he sensed the will to attack from them.

Are they trying to kill us…? Why?

Koutarou had no reason to be attacked in this age. Since he was travelling through time, he had nothing to do with the people of this age. Because of that, the possibilities were quite limited.

Are they just targeting us at random? Or…

Koutarou looked at Kii. There was a chance that she was being targeting for some reason. He had only heard that she had run away from home, but if she had run away from a rich family, it was possible that they could be after her life or to kidnap her.

“We can't go on ahead. Let's go back a little and take another road.”

Protecting Kii from behind, Koutarou tried to distance them from the strange group. Knowing that it might be dangerous, there was no way to try to push through them. It was even more dangerous with a child with him.

“Onii-chan! There are people behind us too!”

“What!?”

Before they knew it, a large number of people had appeared behind Koutarou and Kii. Like the people that had appeared in front of them, their ages and genders were all over the place as well. And as expected, they had the same strange atmosphere around them.

This alley was a straight line, and with both exits blocked, Koutarou and Kii couldn't get away.

Regardless of what's going on, this situation is a pain… What do I do?

Their escape had been cut off, and he still didn't know what the group was after, but he could sense their killing intent. It was hard to imagine that nothing would happen now. But there were too many to forcibly push through. It was possible if he had his sword and armor, but he had neither on him right now. On top of that, Kii was with him. It would be hard to protect her and escape while unarmed.

The Heart's Balance

I guess I have to ask Clan for help…

Clan often used her bracelet to summon weapons. So it was possible that he might be able to have a weapon sent to him the same way. It would be best if he could have Signaltin sent to him, but he didn't know if it was possible.

I should have made preparations for situations like this…

Koutarou didn't believe that anyone would attack him in this age, and he would stand out far too much if he was running around wearing his weapon and armor, not to mention that it would introduce a different kind of danger. Comparing the risk of wearing his weapon and armor to the risk of coming across an enemy, the best bet would be not wearing his weapon and armor, but in the end, the enemy had appeared.

There was no use crying over spilled milk.

If the two could safely get out of this situation, Koutarou would ask Clan to make it possible to summon Signaltin using the bracelet.

“But for now.”

Koutarou touched the gem on the bracelet. That gem was a switch that could be configured to activate one of many functions, and in this case it opened a communications channel with Clan. One could call it speed dialing.

“Oh my, I can't have you call for help.”

However, Koutarou was unable to call Clan for help. That was because a woman had appeared from the darkness and attacked Koutarou with a large weapon. Koutarou was distracted by the groups in front of him and behind him while trying to get in touch with Clan. Because of that, it was perfect surprise attack.

“Uwah!?”

All that Koutarou could do was use his bracelet to deflect the large weapon, a scythe like the one the reaper is often shown using. He had been able to block the attack in the nick of time, but the bracelet was shattered.

“Oh… to think you could block that attack. Very impressive.”

The woman was wearing an indigo colored outfit with a darker indigo colored mantle on top. Koutarou hadn't noticed her presence partly because of this outfit. With this outfit, she could blend in with the darkness.

Because the hood of the mantle covered about half of her face and the fact that her large scythe was emitting a red glow, she looked like the reaper to Koutarou.

“As if, you were targeting this bracelet to begin with.”

Koutarou had been able to block the attack, but he was secretly panicking. It had only been because the woman was after the bracelet from the start that he had been able to block the attack. But if she had been after Koutarou's life instead, or after Kii's life, would he have been able to block it? Koutarou began doubting himself.

This is bad… she's calm…

What made Koutarou even more flustered was that the woman kept her calm. Her top priority was to keep Koutarou from calling for reinforcements. To her, their lives came second or lower.

To kill Koutarou, she would only have needed to step in a little further. However, since she wasn't sure of his capabilities she targeted his bracelet first. It would be problematic if he had been able

to call for reinforcements if she had failed to kill him. After destroying his bracelet, killing him would be easy.

The Heart's Balance

The Heart's Balance

It was thanks to his experience with battles in Forthorthe that he could understand her plans. That's why Koutarou was panicking. The most dangerous thing on the battlefield wasn't a strong enemy, but a calm one.

“Aren't you a scary child, boy… To understand that at your age, I'm really glad I waited for you to separate from your friend.”

“Damnit!”

If she was just a strong enemy, she would surely use brute force when Koutarou and Clan were together. But that wasn't what she had done. Instead, she calmly waited for her chance. And that's why Koutarou was now in this predicament. Simple fighting power could easily be overcome by waiting for an opening.

“That's why I have something I would like to ask.”

The woman lowered her scythe and the tip of it hit the ground.

When it did, the people in front of and behind Koutarou and Kii stopped moving. They kept their distance and surrounded Koutarou and Kii.

…Is she these people's leader…?

Based off of the reaction the strange group showed, Koutarou felt like they were her followers. He couldn't imagine what kind of relationship they had, but if they were cooperating it was a problematic situation for him.

“Could you just hand that girl over?”

The mysterious woman stood in the center of a circle her strange group formed and pointed at Kii with her empty left hand.

“Kii-chan?”

Koutarou carefully watched his surroundings as he answered. He couldn't let his guard down for a moment.

“Yes, that's right. I want that girl.”

The shape of her mouth that was peeking out from under the hood changed to a smile. However, there was no friendliness in her smile. If anything, it was freezing cold.

“It's not like I live to fight. If possible, I don't want to fight with you, boy. Neither do you, right?”

They were gentle words on the surface, but it was obviously a threat. It was an old trick, to threaten your target after showing off your ability. It put pressure on the opponent, saying they would be killed if they didn't obey.

“Onii-chan.”

Kii grabbed onto Koutarou's sleeve. That action alone was enough to make Koutarou understand her feelings. She was afraid of the woman, and she didn't want to part with him. Koutarou touched Kii's hand and glared at the woman.

“What are you planning on doing with her? It doesn't look like you're here to take her back home.”

If she was just going to take back Kii home, there wouldn't have been a reason to attack Koutarou. The previous strike was enough to cut off his arm if it wasn't for the bracelet. She was quite clearly hostile.

“I believe it would be easier for you to hand her over before you hear that reason.”

“So you really are planning on killing her.”

The Heart's Balance

Koutarou read her intentions based on the woman's behavior and words.

“Oh, I never mentioned such a thing?”

“What an obvious lie…”

“I just want to finish my job with ease. There's no ulterior motive.”

Seeing Koutarou's reaction, the mysterious woman smiled again. That smile was enough to convince Koutarou.

Her aim was Kii's life. It didn't look like she was planning on killing her here, but that was her ultimate goal.

Having realized that, Koutarou clearly refused.

“I won't let you have her. She's my precious friend!”

“Onii-chan!”

Kii's expression brightened. She knew that their current situation was bad, but she was happy that Koutarou hadn't abandoned her. She was also happy that he had called her his friend.

“My, you're so suspecting. I never mentioned anything about killing her.”

The mysterious woman, still smiling, raised and held her scythe with both hands. She had expected this response based on how Koutarou had been reacting up until now. She wasn't as much of a pacifist as she made herself out to be, she was planning on fighting from the start. The words she had spoken had only been to measure Koutarou's ability.

We're outnumbered and unarmed. And my opponent is a mystery…

Koutarou took a stance and clicked his tongue in his mind. She had called Koutarou scary before, but he was the one scared. He himself was well aware that he had almost no chance of winning.

“Onii-chan…”

“It's okay. Just stay back a little.”

“O-Okay…”

But regardless of his chances, Koutarou had no choice but to fight. Behind him was a powerless Kii. He was the only one who could protect her, and since he knew that, he never had the option of abandoning her.

And like that, in order to not betray something within himself, Koutarou stepped up to fight a battle he knew he had almost no chance of winning.

Part 3

The mysterious woman made the first move. Since Koutarou had to protect Kii, he couldn't make any bold advances. Which naturally meant that she got to go on the offensive.

“If you've got something hidden up your sleeves, you should use it right away! Do you think you have a chance to win when you're unarmed and going up against someone with a weapon!?”

“Show me an idiot that would fight and plan to lose!”

“I don't hate people like you!”

The mysterious woman's indigo mantle fluttered as she swung her large scythe at Koutarou. The wind pressure from her motion shook the hood of her mantle and revealed her face. She was about 20 years old, and Koutarou had not met her before.

“She's fast!? And that scythe isn't normal!”

The mysterious woman moved fast. Despite using such a large scythe, it didn't look like the momentum of the scythe was affecting her. She swung her scythe and spun around like a spinning top. If anything, it looked like she was stabilized by spinning the scythe. Koutarou couldn't believe that that was possible with a top heavy scythe like that. This kind of movement would only be possible if she was swinging around a stick or cane. It was as if the blade itself didn't exist.

“That's because this blade doesn't have a physical form!”

“So that's why!”

Koutarou twisted his body and the large scythe grazed him and tore up his clothes. He shivered when he saw that far too smooth cut. Despite her saying that the blade didn't have a physical form, the scythe was sharper than the real deal.

This scythe has been made by creating a blade-shaped barrier on the cane! I can't be fooled by its classic shape! This is on the same level as Theia or Clan.

The physical part of the scythe is the handle, which was originally a cane. And through some means, energy had been focused at the top of it and created a scythe's blade. As a result, it handled like a cane, but it had the power and range of a scythe, creating an absurd weapon.

Koutarou believed it was a product of technology, but it wasn't. The blade had been created by the woman's magic. Her name was Maya, a magician by the codename Dark Navy.

“Oh… it seems like you're a special boy.”

Maya stopped her attack and distanced herself. She then praised Koutarou.

This boy isn't just an ordinary child. It seems he's seen weapons made from energy before…

Maya had mentioned how the scythe worked to learn more about Koutarou. Against someone who had no knowledge of magic, the person wouldn't be able to understand even if they were told how it worked, or they would think they were being made fun of. Despite that, Koutarou instantly understood what it meant. That meant that Koutarou knew of magic, or something similar to it. Maya suspected that there wasn't much of a chance of Koutarou himself being a magician. If that had been the case, he should have used magic by now.

And I'm using strengthening magic to improve my physique and he's still keeping up…

Maya praised Koutarou because he was able to fight her while unarmed. When she had started her attack, she had cast a spell on herself to improve her power. Strengthening her muscles, increasing the speed of her reflexes and enhancing the activity in her brain. Because of that, she was fast. Since she was moving almost as fast as the human mind could handle, a normal person

shouldn't be able to keep up with her. Despite that, Koutarou was somehow barely doing just that, and without a weapon.

Is he a natural Manafist? Or perhaps he's a Psionic Soldier? It's not just his physical prowess either, he seems to be quite experienced… I can't let me guard down just because he's unarmed. Who knows what tricks he might be hiding…

Though extremely rare, there are cases of natural magicians that could instinctively use magic without any training. But because this kind of magician doesn't have the awareness that they're magicians, they tend to focus their magic power on moving their body or maintaining their health. As a result, they end up as a kind of superhuman. The same thing could happen with ESP and spiritual energy. Maya suspected that Koutarou might be one of those.

And looking at how Koutarou moved his body, she noticed that he had an abundance of actual combat experience. The way he moved his legs and body were flawless. Those kind of movements could only be gained through repeated combat.

Koutarou was slower than Maya and he was unarmed, but he was more skilled than Maya. Because of that, he was able to fight against Maya, and this was the reason why she praised him as being special.

“I'm not very special myself. I've just been part of a few wars.”

“All truly strong people call themselves weak. And those who call themselves strong end up dying… It looks like I can't take it easy this time around.”

Maya smiled again and readied her scythe. Though her lips had formed a smile, the eyes peeking out from under hood did not.

“…An enemy on the same level as Theia, and I'm unarmed… Seriously, I'm not like landlord-san…”

Koutarou took a stance as well and grieved at his current predicament. However, he still hadn't given up.

“Onii-chan, don't get hurt.”

“I don't know if I can avoid it. But I'll give it a try.”

Kii was behind him. Regardless of his situation, he couldn't afford to lose. He just couldn't abandon her.

Victory goes to those who make the first move!

Koutarou didn't want to go too far ahead and leave Kii, but he couldn't hold back against this opponent. She had a longer reach and more power. If he just sat there waiting, he wouldn't be able to get in range. Because of that, he had to charge in himself.

“You can do it, Onii-chan!”

Receiving Kii's cheers, Koutarou dashed forward. As he did, he unleashed the spiritual energy that Sanae had planted in him to its very limit. That instantly increased his speed.

I'm counting on you, Sanae! Last just a little longer!

In reality, Koutarou's spiritual energy had been growing weaker and weaker. He wasn't capable of using it to begin with and he was only able to do so after Sanae had created routes in his body. However, since this practically meant that his original routes had been forcibly overwritten, his ability gradually weakened as time passed. When he had been with Sanae, she would regularly rewrite them, but quite some time had passed now. Because of that, he was at less than half of what he had been at the start. That was one of the reasons why Koutarou was slower

than Maya. But right now, this was all he had. All he could do was pray that it lasted long enough for this battle to end.

“Good call, boy! You might even be able to beat me!”

“I'll wipe that smug off your face soon enough!”

The scythe that Maya swung down grazed Koutarou's hair. While a portion of his bangs were floating in the air, Koutarou poured all of his force into his fist and thrust it towards Maya.

“Our weakness is that we're weak in close combat, but—”

However, Maya showed no signs of trying to dodge it. Koutarou's fist was travelling towards Maya's defenseless stomach.

What? No, keep going!

Koutarou had noticed Maya's strange behavior, but he ignored it and continued thrusting his fist towards her. Hesitating in the fight would spell his doom.

“Through thorough preparation one can make up for that weakness.”

However, Koutarou's fist never reached Maya.

“Kuh, you've put up a barrier here too!?”

“Precisely!”

Just before his fist was about to crash into Maya, it stopped like it had collided with a wall. Her defensive magic had stopped his attack. All of a sudden, a translucent yellow light had appeared and shielded Maya.

“Which means I can focus on just attacking!”

Maya never had any intention to defend herself so she had already readied her next attack. Since she had such a large weapon, there were large openings. But relying on defensive magic, she could ignore those openings and focus on the offense. Surprisingly, if one could use powerful defensive spells, a large weapon could become a powerful tool for a magician.

“How about this!?”

The large scythe approached Koutarou. And on its way, it began emitting an indigo colored light.

I can't allow that to hit me!

Koutarou instinctively sensed the danger and tried to distance himself by kicking off of Maya's handle. But that was when something strange happened.

“Kuh, you've put up a barrier here too!? … Huh!?”

After kicking the handle, Koutarou stopped moving and he repeated what he had said a few seconds ago. He was puzzled, the last thing he remembered was that he had just thrown his fist at Maya, but his body had just kicked off her scythe.

“Impossible, what just happened!?”

Maya didn't miss the opening Koutarou gave her and she removed her left hand from the scythe and pointed it towards Koutarou. And she spoke a bundle of words, as if she was reading a beautiful verse.

“Thunderbolt – Modifier – Short Range – And – Area Effect!”

A white flash. A powerful electric shock was released from Maya's hand. In contrast to her beautiful words, the effect they had brought were the opposite of beauty. The electric shock spread from her hand and assaulted Koutarou.

The Heart's Balance

“Oh crap!?”

Koutarou noticed his own error and hurriedly moved to dodge. However, since Maya had set the effective area to be large, he couldn't completely avoid it.

When bathed by a powerful electric shock, people don't convulse like many people believe. They just receive a powerful impact and their entire body cramps up instantly. At the same time, they go numb and lose control of their body. And that's exactly what happened to Koutarou.

“Onii-chan!?”

“You really are special. You almost completely dodged it.”

Maya's favorite combination was challenging someone in close combat while covering her weapon with a spell that caused very short memory loss, and while her opponent temporarily stopped, she unleashed a wide area attack. No one apart from other magicians had dodged this attack up until now. Of course Koutarou hadn't dodged it either, but he had avoided the majority of the electricity. That was more than enough to surprise Maya.

“D-Damnit…”

Koutarou tried to get back up, but the damage he had taken was too heavy and he couldn't freely move his body.

Please move, body! I can't fall here!

Even then he didn't give up. Koutarou mustered all of his strength and forcibly moved his body. By doing that, his body somehow responded, and using his limbs as support, he forced himself to stand up. His movements were slow and awkward, like a zombie from a horror movie.

“Onii-chan! A-Are you okay!?”

“…Yeah. Somehow.”

With a blue face he smiled at Kii. Of course, he wasn't in a state he could call okay. Right now, all he could do was stand up.

In the past, Yurika's defensive spell had been in effect. Back then, he probably wouldn't have taken this much damage from such an attack. But as time passed that spell had lost most of its effect. A long time had passed during while Koutarou and Clan were in Forthorthe. The powers he had gotten from the invading girls were reaching their limit.

“I won't lose, ever!”

However, all Koutarou had lost was his power. Everything else he had gotten from the girls were still inside of him. And that let him stand up. If he didn't, he couldn't protect Kii. And he wouldn't be able to fulfill the promise and his oath.

“I must say I am surprised. To think you could stand in that state… wouldn't it be easier if you just stayed down?”

“Have you ever seen someone not struggle when they're drowning because it's easier that way?”

Koutarou formed a fist and glared at Maya. At the same time, he examined how Maya fought in his mind.

Even though I got up, I don't know what she did a moment ago. It felt like time flew out the window, it'll be problematic if that happens again…

In reality, he had lost a portion of his memory, but to Koutarou it felt as if time had stood still and his body had changed location. The problem was if he could deal with it if it happened again. Then there was the problem with the barrier protecting her. There was no end to his problems.

“…That's true.”

Maya calmly ignored his glare and readied her scythe. And she imagined what was going through Koutarou's head as he wasn't coming at her right away.

Even if he notices the gap in his memory, he won't believe that I erased it. But he'll suspect it was something I did… Which means the places he'll aim for will be limited…

While Maya focused on her own thoughts for a moment Koutarou began his move.

Making use of all the power he had left he was going to finish the fight now. His opponent used strange powers and a weapon, meaning that the longer the fight dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would become.

I won't miss this chance! This is that boy's scariest side!

Maya also began moving. She swung her scythe down towards Koutarou. The blade emitted an indigo colored light. Memory loss magic had been enchanted into the scythe this time as well.

“Uooooooooooooooooo!”

“And his aim is…!”

The two clashed. Koutarou sent a kick towards Maya's lower body.

The barrier protecting Maya automatically activated upon being attacked. However, in order to get a good balance when running, she couldn't completely cover her legs. A slight gap was left in order for the barrier to not touch the ground. That was the point Koutarou aimed for.

“I thought so!”

However, a different barrier blocked his attack. Having predicted that Koutarou would attack her feet, Maya had created another barrier inside that directly protected her feet.

“It's not over yet!”

However, Koutarou didn't stop there. His real aim was Maya's face that had lowered in response to his attack. More precisely, it was the chin sticking out from under her mantle's hood.

“I see, you're attacking between the force field’s cool down time—”

Koutarou's fist grazed Maya's chin. Just from that grazing hit, her vision had been greatly distorted.

“It was too shallow!”

Koutarou realized that his attack had failed and attempted to distance himself from Maya by moving to her side. Maya aimed for his back as he moved, but the shock from having her chin struck still hadn't settled and she ended up cutting the air.

“I thought so, she's not good at using multiple layers of defenses at the same time.”

When Koutarou turned back to Maya, she was grinning.

“Oh how scary. Just who are you?”

While stroking her chin, she showed a confident smile, but on the inside she was horribly surprised.

He took the fact that I use force fields for my defense into his calculations and forced me to create an additional force field by aiming for my feet. And waiting for the timing for it to disappear, he launched his real attack. During that time, since I'm using my magic power on my scythe's blade and two force fields, it creates a few seconds where I'm defenseless. He's strong…

The Heart's Balance

Since Koutarou was used to using his armor's maneuver boosters, he was well versed in how barriers functioned. He couldn't draw more power than what the capacitor allowed for, and there was a slight time gap between when a barrier vanished and when it could be recreated. He didn't know if Maya's barriers had the same characteristics, but he suspected the chances were high that sustaining two barriers and a blade at the same time would be hard.

“But knowing that that's what you're going to do, I have ways to counter it.”

Maya cancelled the barrier protecting her, while her stance changed to a more defensive posture. She was going to use the scythe to defend herself as well. Since the blade didn't have a physical form, its defensive capabilities weren't those of a scythe, but of a cane. She had also enchanted the scythe with memory loss magic, so the moment Koutarou touched it, it would activate. Her strain was reduced, but her defense was improved and she was still as dangerous as before.

“That would be true if my next move was the same.”

Koutarou showed a confident smile as well.

Not good…

However, that smile was just a bluff. If Maya was going to defend using with her scythe as well, it would be hard for him to get through both that and any occasional barriers.

“I don't think there's anything else you can do though.”

“Then just bring it. You'll find out soon enough.”

While speaking, Koutarou desperately racked his brain. He had to break free from this situation and protect Kii.

“Then I'll take you up on your offer!”

However, before Koutarou could come up with his next plan, Maya began her attack. Koutarou was forced to stop thinking and moved to intercept her.

“Come on, what's wrong!? Don't you have an ace up your sleeve!?”

“Damnit!”

Maya threw attack after attack at Koutarou and all he could do was avoid them.

Unlike before, Maya's attacks had smaller motions. All she had to do to begin with was touch Koutarou with the scythe enchanted with memory loss magic. She could make bigger attacks after that. And with her smaller motions, her attack speed increased and forced Koutarou onto the defensive. For the same reason, his windows for counter attacks shrank. The attacks he had thrown out in the gaps of her attacks were blocked through the scythe and barrier, and were ineffective.

“Onii-chan, you can do it!”

Unable to silently watch, Kii cheered for Koutarou. Despite not having any experience fighting, she could tell that Koutarou was being cornered.

“Quit moving around!”

However, even though she had him cornered, Maya was always one step short of finishing him off. That was thanks to the power to use spiritual energy that he still had within him. Koutarou predicted her attacks and dodged them at the last second. Eventually, Maya grew irritated and changed her tactics.

“Then how about this! Flash!”

The Heart's Balance

“Oh crap!?”

All of a sudden a white flash appeared. It was far brighter than the electric shock from a moment ago. Koutarou temporarily lost his vision from that overly bright light.

“And!”

Maya spun around and struck him with the handle of her scythe.

Koutarou had no way to avoid it.

“Damnit! … W-What, my eyes!?”

He was once again deprived of several seconds of his memory and that included the memory of losing his sight, leaving him at a complete standstill. In that time, Maya swung her scythe in a large motion. She no longer needed to worry about her form. With this attack that she put her entire weight into, she would finish Koutarou off.

“Onii-chan, look out!”

“I see, this is that thing!”

Kii screamed out a warning to the confused Koutarou. Thanks to that, he realized that he had taken one of Maya's attacks.

“You're too late!”

Maya's attack was just about to hit. There was no longer any time to dodge it.

I'll get cut up! I won't make it!

Koutarou braced himself for getting cut. However, he wasn't planning on going down just like that.

“Now it's over! Boy!”

“No, not yet!”

His ability to see spiritual energy let him see the scythe's trajectory. Koutarou crossed his arms and forcibly threw them at the scythe.

Thanks to his arms colliding with the handle, the scythe stopped after cutting into his shoulder. He had managed to avoid a fatal blow, but he had suffered heavy damage and large amounts of blood poured out from the wound on his shoulder.

“Onii-chan!?”

“Boy… you can't even properly see. Though you're an enemy, that's very impressive.”

Maya had planned to cut Koutarou in half in a single blow. However, Koutarou had still survived. Though he had taken a major blow, he was still alive and Maya couldn't help but praise him.

“I already told you! That you'll find out soon enough!”

Koutarou didn't stop. He endured the pain and forcibly grabbed onto Maya.

“I see, boy, so this is what you were planning!”

Though her defenses might be tough, that wasn't the case when she made large attacks. He'd let her attack then close in. And even if he couldn't see, if he could grab a hold of her that wouldn't matter. This was his ace up his sleeve. It was an extremely dangerous bet where he put his own life on the line. But he had won that bet.

“I let my guard down! He's used to fighting!”

And while Koutarou was holding Maya down, he shouted out loud.

The Heart's Balance

“Kii-chan, now's your chance to run away!”

“But, I can't leave you behind Onii-chan!”

“Just go! They're after you!”

Koutarou was regaining his vision. However, considering Maya's strength, the people around them and the damage he had taken, this was Kii's only chance to escape. Kii would have to break through the people around them by herself, but she could only do this now while Maya was pinned down.

“Onii-chan! I'll go call for help right away!”

Kii had objected at first, but she soon decided to listen to Koutarou. Maya was too strong, so Kii couldn't save Koutarou herself. She had to get through the people surrounding them and call for help. That was the best a six-year-old girl could do.

There… I might be able to get through that gap….!

Without letting her guard down, Kii found a slight gap between the buildings. It was so small that she would barely be able to get through with her small body. Kii ran towards it without hesitation.

“I won't let you! You guys, don't let her get away!”

Despite being held down by Koutarou, Maya wasn't going to let Kii get away. Since she couldn't move, she ordered the people around them to capture her. Obeying her orders, they chased after Kii.

“Kyaaaaaa! Noooo, let go!”

Kii screamed.

Sadly, Kii was captured by the people being manipulated by Maya. Since they were outnumbered, it was hard for her to escape.

“Kii-chan!?”

Koutarou couldn't tell what had happened to Kii since he was in the middle of a struggle. But he understood that she was in danger from her scream.

“Hey now, I'm your opponent!”

In the moment that Koutarou focused on Kii, Maya punched Koutarou's shoulder.

“Guaaaaaaaaaa!”

Koutarou was struck with a numbing acute pain. Since the punch had been thrown in the way to forcibly open his wound, the pain felt like a blisteringly hot metal rod was pushed up against him. And with this blow, his bleeding got even worse, dying his clothes red with his blood.

“You did well, boy, really! But!”

Maya kept her fist pressed against Koutarou's wound and focused on it. She was going to shoot magic directly into him. It was hard to use magic when in close combat. She couldn't even get a proper grip on her cane. However, Koutarou showed an opening after her blow, so with Maya's high skills, she should be able to cast simple spells. And even a simple spell could be fatal when injected directly into him through the wound on his shoulder.

“Guaaaaaaa!”

While focusing on her spell, Maya continued to attack Koutarou's wound. He was about to pass out from the acute pain and hemorrhaging. Normally he would have resisted, but right now he wasn't able to.

The Heart's Balance

“Onii-chan, Onii-chan! Let go of Onii-chan!”

That was when Kii's voice jumped into his mind as he was fading away.

Kii-chan is… crying again…

Kii was screaming, and it wasn't because she had been captured. She was screaming for Koutarou's sake as he was being attacked.

I have to do something… something… so she can live happily… she's already cried more than enough…

An image of Kii crying appeared in Koutarou's mind. He wanted her smile to return, but he didn't know how. He couldn't move his body and the enemy's attack was around the corner.

What… What can I do to keep her from crying…? Just what…

At this moment, all that Koutarou could think of was about doing something. However, with him being unable to do anything, Maya began her incantation.

“Quick And Still Cast – Tiny Explosion!”

Maya had cast a basic explosive spell that could be cast even in a grappling match that omitted the need for motions. As her incantation finished, her fist began glowing red. If she slammed that fist into Koutarou again, the spell would activate.

“It's over, boy!”

Maya was convinced of her victory, and swung her fist dyed red by blood and magic at Koutarou again. It was obvious that at this rate the spell would cause an explosion from the inside of his shoulder that would blow his arm away.

“Stooooooop!”

Kii screamed, but that wouldn't stop Maya. Her fist headed straight for Koutarou.

“It will be okay…”

However, just before the fist was about to rob Koutarou of his life, it happened.

A white light appeared around his shoulder. The light enveloped his shoulder and at the same time created a round shield protecting it from Maya's fist. It was because of that shield that Maya's attack had been unable to reach Koutarou.

“Impossible!? He cast a force field in this state without any signs!? He even erased my magic!?”

Aghast, Maya quickly distanced herself from Koutarou.

The range might be limited, but he just cast a force field without any motion or incantation, and it even has properties of anti-magical shield! And what is with this pure white magic power!? I've never heard of this kind of magic power!

Maya couldn't understand what had just happened in front of her very eyes. It was something that surpassed a magician's common sense. It was a powerful attack that shouldn't have been able to be blocked.

But what perplexed her the most was the color of the magic power around Koutarou. Normally, magic power was separated into the seven colors of the rainbow. Summoning was blue, defense was yellow and so on. However, a white color surrounded Koutarou. A magic power that shouldn't exist was protecting him.

That's not possible… The wound on his shoulder is closing… A single type of magic is protecting, degenerating and healing at the same time… Just who is this boy?

The Heart's Balance

Maya distanced herself from Koutarou because she feared the unknown magic power that he was controlling. Her intuition as a warrior told her that he was currently very dangerous.

“Just what is…”

However, Koutarou was just as surprised. All of a sudden a white light had appeared, blocked Maya's attack and was now healing the wound on his shoulder. It was only natural for him to be astonished.

Ah…

However, Koutarou had a memory of this light, no, this white magical power. It was the same magical power as Signaltin emitted.

“I see, her majesty saved me…”

Koutarou could feel Alaia's presence from the magical power. It was the same as when he used Signaltin. Even with Signaltin far away from Koutarou's hands, Alaia's oath continued to protect him.

“You guys, stop that boy!”

Maya was quick to give up. By the time Koutarou began emitting an unknown power, she gave up on the battle and decided to prioritize her original goal.

“You're coming with me.”

“Noo, Onii-chan!”

Maya sent the people she was controlling after Koutarou while she was going to restrain Kii and make a run for it.

If I'm going to fight against that boy, I'd prefer it if that was my only goal. If I were to use a proverb, it would be 'if I were to chase after two hares, I would fail to catch either!'

Maya had assumed that her battle with Koutarou would end quickly. However, that hadn't been the case. At this rate, if she continued fighting against Koutarou who had an unknown power, she might be unable to use Kii as a sacrifice. She calmly decided to take Kii with her first.

“Wait! Leave her behind!”

“Fufu, let us meet again if fate allows it, boy!”

“Onii-chan!”

Kii struggled as best as she could to get away, but she lost consciousness after Maya cast a spell. Maya then left the area while carrying Kii. Koutarou wanted to chase after her right away, but he couldn't break through the group blocking his path. On top of that, the wound on his shoulder still hadn't healed, nor had he fully recovered from the other damage he had taken during the battle. Then there was the problem that he couldn't hurt the group.

“Kuh, I don't have time for this!”

Koutarou swung his fist and began injuring the people in his way. However, their numbers just weren't reducing. Since Signaltin's power was being directed at keeping him conscious and healing his wounds, he couldn't attack the way he wanted. Of course, since he was receiving power remotely, at the very best some power was discharged as he punched. Because of that, Koutarou couldn't move even after he had completely lost sight of Maya.

“Dammit, at this rate she's going to kill Kii!”

The Heart's Balance

Koutarou started panicking as he realized that Maya and Kii were gone. The longer the time passed, the lower the chances of him finding Kii would become. And his frustration towards the group in front of him, whose numbers just weren't decreasing, grew rapidly.

“Kanae-san, the bow.”

“Okay! I'm counting on you, Nana-chan!”

“Sonic Web – Modifier – Non Lethal – Charge Weapon – Effective Area Large!”

That was when a single arrow was fired into the group of people in Koutarou's way. That arrow had just flown past them, but the people in the line of fire were sent flying. As a result, a path opened up for Koutarou.

“What just happened!?”

Since the people he had been fighting fainted Koutarou looked around him. That was when he spotted two people about ten meters behind.

One of them was a woman in her late twenties wearing a suit and holding a bow. The other was a girl wearing a pink mantle. Koutarou hadn't seen the woman with the bow before, and he couldn't recognize the girl because the mantle’s hood covered her face. They were a strange duo that he had no recollection of meeting before.

Did they… help me?

He wasn't sure, but that was all he could think of considering the situation. To confirm his suspicions, he called out to them.

“Who are you!?”

“There's no time to talk! You have to hurry after that vixen!”

As the woman with the bow said that, she readied for another shot. And her next shot cleared the crowd in front of Koutarou again.

“But…”

Koutarou couldn't make up his mind right away. They were a mysterious duo that had just shown up all of a sudden, and while Koutarou was hesitating, the girl in the pink mantle spoke.

“Listen! That woman in the indigo mantle and us are enemies! We want to chase after her! But we can't leave this place like it is!”

“That voice is…”

Koutarou had heard this voice before.

Is that… the girl from that time?

The voice of the girl wearing the pink mantle sounded very similar to that of the girl that had appeared in the mountain forest when Koutarou was alleviating Kii's nightmare.

“If you chase after her we can focus on this place! We're better at dealing with this kind of thing than you!”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Koutarou shouted that back to the girls and rushed through the path created by the arrow.

There's no time to hesitate! I just have to believe in that girl!

At this rate, Kii would die sooner or later. In order to avoid that, he had no choice but to believe in the duo. And if that girl in the pink mantle was the girl that had appeared that night, he should

be able to believe in her. Because there should be powerful and gentle eyes beneath that mantle's hood.

“Raaaaaaaaaaa.”

The people being controlled let out cries as they tried to stop Koutarou who was trying to break away. However, another arrow came flying through and sent the people who were about to jump onto him flying.

“Thank you!”

As a result, only two managed to reach him. And if it was just two, he could evade them with swift moves. Before long, Koutarou broke free from the group surrounding him and vanished as he chased after Maya.

“Nana-chan, was that guy that necromancer?”

While drawing the bow, the woman in the suit called out to the girl in the mantle. The arrow had been enchanted with the girl in mantle's powers. Once fired, the arrow unleashed its power and numbed the people approaching them and forced them to a stop.

“Yes. I am certain that he can pull it off.”

The girl in the pink mantle pulled out a cane. With its many decorations, it was hard to imagine that it was used for walking. It was a tool that enhanced her powers, the partner she had always fought alongside with.

“He had such earnest eyes, after all.”

“But that doesn't change the fact that it's dangerous. We have to release these people and chase after him!”

The girl in the mantle held her cane above her head. As she did, her hood shifted and revealed her face. Just like Koutarou had suspected, it was the girl he had met that night.

In the current situation, she believed their best chance was to let Koutarou go on ahead. Considering her goal, she wanted to chase after Maya right away, however Koutarou was struggling against the crowd of enemies, and she couldn't leave people being controlled on their own. Because of that, she sent Koutarou on ahead while they would release the people being controlled before chasing after him. This was a plan that put a great deal of faith in Koutarou's abilities, but she was confident in her intuition. Though she looked young, she was a warrior that had survived many battles.

“Kanae-san. I'll leave it to you for a while!”

“Okay, I'll buy you some time!”

Her name was Nana, however those who knew her called her Rainbow Nana with respect.

Nana was a magician of Rainbow Heart, the regular army of the magical kingdom of Folsaria. At a young age of ten years old, she was a prodigy that held the highest rank of arc wizard, earning her the title of Rainbow. And at the same time, she was the strongest magical girl in Rainbow Heart who stood at the frontlines and battled Folsaria's enemy, Darkness Rainbow.

Part 4

Thanks to the help of the mysterious duo, Koutarou had been able to escape the alley and was now chasing down Maya by following her aura. However, the trace was hard to distinguish and she would pass by populated streets from time to time, blending her aura in with the people who were on their way home, which meant that it took time for him to pick up her track. And the longer time passed, the weaker the remains of her aura grew.

“If only Sanae was with me at a time like this…”

Sanae would probably have been able to easily follow after Maya. This was Koutarou's limit as his powers grew weaker. But this was his only choice. He continued chasing after Maya's trace as he started panicking.

About 15 minutes had past after leaving the mysterious duo behind, Maya's aura passed by another populated street.

“This is bad…”

At this point, the traces of Maya's aura were barely visible. Because of that, on a populated street such as this, other people's auras covered Maya's aura and hid it. Koutarou was at a loss as he had finally lost sight of Maya.

Where did she go…? Should I just check every nearby alley one at a time…?

Because it was a major street, there were many connecting roads. Checking each and every single one of them as the only trace of Maya slowly faded was the only way. It was a difficult and time-consuming undertaking.

“Dammit.”

Hesitating will just take more time, reducing the chances of him being able to find Kii. With no time left, Koutarou swiftly made up his mind and took action.

“I finally found you, Bertorion.”

And just as Koutarou had left the populated street to check one of the roads, he heard a familiar voice from above.

“Clan!?”

“W-Wait, what's with that wound on your shoulder! Are you okay!? Did you properly treat it!?”

Koutarou looked up and saw a mass of metal about a meter above him. It was Clan's unmanned observation device that had seen much use. The observation descended to the same level as Koutarou's head and began spinning around him. Clan was examining Koutarou's body to confirm that he was alright.

The Heart's Balance

“Good timing, Clan!”

Koutarou smiled and grabbed the observation device with both of his hands and began shaking it up and down.

“Eeeeh!? W-What!?”

As he did, Clan's expression, displayed by a hologram, turned into one of confusion.

“Clan, do you know where Kii is right now!?”

“Kii was that child, wasn't she? Oh yeah, you're not together.”

The observation device rotated its cameras looking for Kii. Koutarou then shook it once more.

“I'm in a hurry! Do you know where she is or not!?”

Clan was surprised by Koutarou's attitude, but she nodded.

“I-I know. When I gave you your bracelet, I also gave that girl a transmitter to—”

“Well done! I love you, Claaan!”

Hearing Clan's answer, Koutarou showed a radiant smile. And he began shaking the observation device even more than before. Since he had just lost sight of Maya, Koutarou was incredibly happy.

“Eeeeeeeeeh!? Y-You love me!? B-But, even if you say that all of a sudden, I-I'm not prepared…!”

Clan was so shaken by what Koutarou had said that her face turned red.

“Quit your yapping! Clan! Where is Kii!? Where is she right now!?”

And after obtaining a clue towards Maya and Kii's whereabouts, Koutarou started up his pursuit again.

Part 5

The transmitter Clan had placed on Kii was still present. Either Maya hadn't noticed it or she couldn't tell what it was because it was from Forthorthe.

Clan used her observation device to follow the transmitters response and guided Koutarou. As he ran after the observation device, he explained what had happened to Clan.

“…And then those two let me go on ahead, and that's why I'm chasing after Kii.”

“Since she's being targeted, it must mean that she's not just some runaway child.”

“Yeah. Looks like it. Her father might be the president of a company or something.”

Maya was quite clearly after Kii. If she was just after a child, she wouldn't go through the trouble of targeting Kii who was with Koutarou. It would be easier targeting a child that was on its own. Maya must have a reason to target Kii specifically.

“I'm also not so sure about that mysterious duo.”

“They're probably not bad people.”

“You believe in people too easily.”

“Really? Well, it's not like I fully trust them like I do with you, but I don't think there's any need to worry. That's just how I feel.”

There wasn't much of a reason for Koutarou to trust in the duo. All he had to go after was what they had said, and the earnest eyes of the girl in the mantle. Neither of them were certain signs.

But Koutarou didn't really doubt them. They had let him get away, and if they were after his life they would have taken it in that alley. It would have been easy had they shot him in the back. They also attacked with care to not kill the people being controlled. Those were all circumstantial evidence, but he had no reason to doubt it.

“…F-Fully trust…?”

“What's with that weird face?”

“Ahem, i-it's nothing!”

Clan blushed as her face turned red. And when Koutarou questioned her, she coughed and looked away.

This is strange… Why I am getting so happy…

When she had first met Koutarou, she had despised him and only seen him as an enemy. Hearing that he now trusted her, she was puzzled by the emotions she was feeling.

“By the way, Clan, why were you around here? I couldn't contact you.”

“W-Well, you see.”

Clan stopped what she was saying to take a deep breath. She still hadn't fully recovered from her restless state.

“I received a warning that the bracelet had broken and Signaltin began shining, so I understood that something was up.”

“So that's why you came looking. Thanks, you're a big help.”

“T-There's no need for thanks. We're in the same boat after all.”

“That's true.”

Being thanked by Koutarou caused Clan's heart to start racing again.

The Heart's Balance

Trust, huh… but if I were to do something against Theiamillis-san, Bertorion would most likely be fuming…

She didn't want to betray Koutarou as a feeling deep inside Clan's heart that wanted him to respect her as a princess began budding. That was a large change for the girl who spent all of her time inside a laboratory and didn't speak with others often.

If she were to listen to that desire, she should fight against Theia, fair and square. Assassinating her was out of the question. More than that, she began believing that dealing with something through fighting wasn't something a respectable princess did.

This was the complete opposite of the policy she had gone by before she came to Earth. And that led her to realize something.

“But with this, I can understand why I lost when I fought against you.”

In the past, when Clan had lost to Koutarou, it had been because she wasn't a splendid princess that her citizens could brag about. She had finally been able to reach that conclusion after all that had happened.

“What do you mean?”

“It's Signaltin. Even though we'll be frozen for ten years, that sword will still be in this city. That sword has always been protecting you, that's why I lost.”

In the world of magic, there were spells that could manipulate time. That meant that magical power wasn't restricted by time, and could move around freely.

Signaltin had been on Earth for over ten years. The physical Signaltin might have been frozen on time onboard the Cradle, but its magical power wasn't restrained the same way and if needed it would leave the ship to protect Koutarou, and those he wanted to protect. That was the true identity of the mysterious power that Koutarou had sometimes used.

However, even then it wasn't capable of rewriting the basic laws of physics, as the energy form could only manifest in a nearby time and distance. That was why its magical power couldn't reach Koutarou 2,000 years back in ancient Forthorthe. In order for him to use its power, the seal had to be broken first.

“I see… so back when Sanae was captured…”

“I am not aware of that event, but that was most likely why. Signaltin, no, Alaia-san's will protected you all.”

The sword that had been imbued by Alaia's oath, the oath of the most respected princess in all of Forthorthe's history, had sided not with Clan, but with Koutarou. In other words, it proved that Clan wasn't worthy of being royalty.

Will Signaltin protect me in the future, I wonder… I am more worried about that than becoming empress…

Most likely from having realized that fact, Clan was no longer as obsessed with becoming empress as she was in the past. Even if she were to become empress, if Signaltin rejected her, it would practically be for nothing.

What was most important was whether Signaltin considered her worthy of protecting or not. Was she a worthy royalty to Alaia's will? Was she worthy of obtaining Koutarou's loyalty?

And from the moment when Clan had clearly realized that, Theia became her most powerful rival.

“That's right, about Signaltin, could you send it to me? Just like the way you always summon weapons, you know.”

Warping in weaponry was a convenient technology. If Koutarou could use holes in space-time to freely retrieve Signaltin, he would have an easier time in future fights.

“It's not possible right away. It will take time to register it.”

However, Clan shook her head.

Forthorthe's technology seemed all powerful, but there were limits. In order to use the space-time holes the necessary preparations had to be made. Since objects could be recreated in case of a failure, they didn't take as long as living creatures, but precise measurements and various parameters had to be calculated. It would be impossible to finish preparations right away.

“I see… Clan, if Signaltin is going to take some time, could you send me a different weapon?”

If Signaltin wasn't possible, he at least wanted a weapon that Clan had made. Koutarou trusted Clan's weapons as much as he trusted Signaltin.

“Time? That's right, Bertorion, the time!”

However, Clan responded in an unexpected manner. Her expression grew stiff and she leaned forward. Because of that Clan's hologram being emitted from the observation device looked like she was about to kiss Koutarou.

“What is it Clan?”

“I don't want to hear that! Isn't it around now that your mother is killed in an accident!?”

“Right, I forgot about that!”

Because of Maya's ambush, Koutarou had temporarily forgotten about it, but the time before his mother was about to die in accident was rapidly closing in.

“What time is it right now!?”

“On this planet, the time is 6:50PM.”

“So I'll just barely make it from here…”

Koutarou was about ten minutes away from the site of the accident. The accident happened just after 7PM. So in order for Koutarou to save his mother, he would have to head there right now.

“However… I can't just leave Kii-chan be…”

Koutarou stopped and began grinding his teeth. Should he go chase after Kii, or save his mother? Koutarou was once again forced to make a decision. If he chased after Kii, his mother would die. On the other hand, if he chose to save his mother, Kii would die.

“Clan, do you have a map of this area?”

“I'm sorry, I do not. If I had known this would have happened, I would have made more thorough preparations…”

Clan looked down with an apologetic expression. Because her calculations had been imperfect, she felt responsibility for the situation that had occurred.

“No, it couldn't be helped.”

Koutarou didn't blame Clan, but he ground his teeth even harder as he started panicking.

He had wondered if he could send Clan's observation device to save his mother. However, since Clan wasn't familiar with this city, it would be hard for her to reach the site without a map. He

also didn't have the time to give her detailed directions. It was also too late for Clan to observe the region and create a map.

Maya's sudden ambush had created a complicated situation, and Koutarou found himself unable to decide if he should save his mother or if he should save Kii.

“What will you do, Bertorion!?”

“I-I…”

If he ran to save his mother, the round trip would take 20 minutes. And it was likely that Kii would lose her life in that time. On the other hand, if he saved Kii, he wouldn't have the time to save his mother.

What should I do!? I don't know what to do!

Kii or his mother, Koutarou was forced to choose one of their lives.

Koutarou was not a god.

There was no method of saving both.

Choice and Result

Part 1

Kii had been taken to an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city. Since Maya had erased the owner's memory, nobody else would approach the place for quite a while. The building was left unattended, and though it wasn't that old, it was dusty and there were cobwebs here and there.

Maya took Kii to the basement of the building. The vast space was originally a parking lot, and in it was an altar where Maya would use ritual magic.

The altar was about ten meters big, with the majority of it having been drawn using a special dye. This was what was known as a magic circle. A machine had been placed on the edge of the magic circle. This machine had a different design from the classic looking candlesticks and furnishings as it was more modern, and it stood out quite clearly. Kii had been left next to that machine inside of a cage made from metal and glass. The machine and cage were connected through many cables.

“Hmm… so this girl has quite a bit of power as well. Is her lineage still present after so many generations? I wonder… Well, with this, I should be able to get the results I want with the spiritual energy capacitor.”

Maya operated the machine and showed a satisfied smile.

The altar served to enhance Maya's magical power and allowed her to use large scale magic. Large scale magic could be used to cast a spell on an entire city or summon a powerful demon.

And Kii was going to be used as a sacrificial catalyst for the ritual. First, she was going to drain Kii's spiritual energy using the machine, and once the capacitor had drained as much as it could, it would be immediately changed into magical power using the magic circle. As a result, Kii would die from having her life force drained and Maya would be able to cast a powerful spell.

Normally, an altar only consisted of a magic circle and a cage that would contain the catalyst. But now there was a machine that had been added onto the altar. Maya had gotten a hold of this machine through a deal with the underground people, the People of the Earth. It was capable of temporarily storing spiritual energy, and with it, she could greatly reduce the requirements needed of the catalyst. Up until now, someone with massive amounts of spiritual energy, like Kanae's daughter, was required, but now even someone with just some spiritual energy would suffice. Maya was satisfied with this and cheerfully prepared for the ritual.

“…Onii-chan…”

Meanwhile, Kii was obediently sitting inside the cage. She had struggled at first, but she had no chance against Maya. And the cage was robust, so she couldn't break out. This left her with no other option than waiting for rescue.

“…I'm sure Onii-chan went to save his mom…”

However, Kii didn't expect anyone to come save her. She believed that Koutarou wouldn't come for her, but would rather save his mother. She herself also knew that it would be hard for him to save both her and his mother.

“…That's for the better, Onii-chan… It's really sad when your mom dies… You'll be all alone until you find her star…”

Kii knew what it felt like to lose one's mother. One would end up searching for their mother's warmth forever, when it's no longer anywhere to be found. And what about abandoning your own mother when you could save her? That would surely cause Koutarou such grief that his

heart would break into tiny pieces. Because of that, Kii would rather that Koutarou saved his mother than have that happen. Kii loved Koutarou so much; that was her honest feelings.

“…Kii met… with mom. Even if I die… I'll become a star next to mom. But Onii-chan is different… He will always suffer until he finds her star… so don't come save Kii, Onii-chan…”

Kii was prepared for her own death. However, she didn't fear it. Thinking that she'd just meet her mother again, her fears were alleviated. That's why all Kii did now was pray that Koutarou had managed to save his mother.

“You sure are calm… aren't you afraid of dying?”

Kii was behaving very differently from all the catalysts that Maya had used before. Interested, she began speaking to Kii.

“I am scared of dying. But I'm more scared of what would happen if I'm saved.”

“You think that man is coming? That's impossible. Nobody can approach this place.”

Maya had cast Sanctuary, a magical barrier that keeps people away around this area. It not only blocked electromagnetic waves and visible light, but it also implanted the urge of not wanting to approaching this place into those nearby. Because of that, just like the name suggested, this place had become an inviolable sanctuary.

And because of that, Maya had hurried back here. Even for a magician, it was hard to find a place that had Sanctuary cast around it right away. It might be possible to find it if they spent a lot of time, but by that time, the ritual would be over. The moment she reached this place, Maya's victory was certain.

“I see… then that's good…”

Koutarou won't come. Once Kii heard that she was relieved and smiled. He surely would have given up and was now on his way to save his mother. If it was as Maya had said, Koutarou's mother wouldn't die. That's why Kii was smiling.

“You really are a strange child… even though you're about to die…”

“Don't you have something that you'd rather die than lose?”

“…I do. Okay then. I'll make sure you suffer as little as possible.”

“…Thank you…”

Maya began respecting the young girl nodding in front of her.

If this girl had grown up and become the leader of the People of the Earth, they just might survive…

Comparing the surface to the underground, Maya was certain that even if Tayuma's group won the political strife and declared war on the surface, they would be ruined in the end.

Regardless of how advanced their technology was, they were just a mere 10,000 in the end. A war wasn't just determined by technology; it was decided by the population and the nation's financial strength. That's because regardless of how powerful their weapons were, they wouldn't function forever. A population of 10,000 would never stand a chance. At best, their war would be considered terrorism.

Tayuma and his group didn't understand that. Or they knew it, but their pride couldn't accept it. Either way, the end results would be the same. They would be stamped as terrorists by the people on the surface and they would slowly perish without ever gaining any ground on the surface.

Choice and Result

However, Maya could sense that the girl in front of her could lead them in the future. She had a high intellect and a clear resolve. She still had room for growth because of her age, but she held the qualities of an excellent leader.

That was why Maya respected Kii. Of course, that wouldn't save Kii's life. Maya also had a clear goal and resolve. But she did feel like she shouldn't make Kii suffer needlessly. That wasn't sympathy, but rather something similar to empathy.

Maya turned her back to Kii and began adjusting the machine further as she closely examined the spell she would be using. That was in order to reduce the suffering that Kii would feel.

However, the time spent on making those adjustments greatly changed Kii's fate.

“Hm…?”

While adjusting the machine, she noticed something and looked towards the entrance behind her.

“What… Could they have found this place? And they easily broke through the barrier…”

Maya sensed the presence of an enemy that had passed through her barrier.

“Just as I was about to get started!”

Maya stopped her adjustments and grabbed the cane near her. She would have to defeat that enemy before she could start the ritual.

If Maya hadn't adjusted the machine to ease Kii's suffering, she would have started her ritual by now. However, in the end, Kii's intelligence had saved her life.

“Could it be…”

Looking at Maya, Kii realized that someone was approaching and who it was. However, she wasn't happy, because she knew what that meant.

“Why did you come!? You should have just left me! Onii-chan!”

Koutarou appeared in the underground parking lot where the altar had been constructed.

Choice and Result

Part 2

Koutarou had found this place thanks to Clan's transmitter. Since it used gravitational waves, it wasn't affected by Sanctuary. Magicians might have known about electromagnetic waves and visible light, but they didn't know of gravitational waves. That's why the spell hadn't been designed to block those out.

“I'm here to save you, Kii-chan.”

Seeing Kii's face, Koutarou felt relieved. Kii on the other hand was not.

“Onii-chan!? What about your mom!?”

“I'll take you with me to save her.”

A light extended from the short metal bar Koutarou was holding. It was one of the beam swords that Flair had used in their battle against Maxfern. Out of what Clan had to offer, this was the weapon that he had chosen. The reasons for this was because Koutarou wasn't used to ranged weapons and because it was Clan's recommendation.

“Then you won't make it! You have to hurry!”

“Yeah. So I'll defeat her right away, and then we'll go save my mom.”

Koutarou held the beam sword with both hands like he would a knight sword. He drew a circle with the tip and then pointed it towards Maya. Since the beam sword was light, his balance was different, but Koutarou was planning on fighting using his Forthorthe style.

“Why did you come to save someone like me!? If your mom dies because of me then I… I!”

Kii wanted Koutarou to run off and save his mother as quickly as possible. She knew that the chances of Koutarou being able to do what he said were incredibly low. At this rate, his mother would die. In fact, Koutarou himself might even die. And that was something that Kii never wanted to happen.

“It's fine. Doing this is natural. I'll save you and then we'll go save my mom together.”

“Onii-chan… b-but…”

Koutarou didn't know if this choice was correct or not either. If he reversed the order, he might have been able to save both, but he had prioritized Kii.

There hadn't been a reason for Koutarou to think that way. If he was pressed for one, he would have said it was because he remembered the reason for why is mother had died. She had died jumping out on the road to save Koutarou. Without thinking about it, she jumped out to save the young life in front of her. That's why Koutarou would do the same. But he wasn't aware of this himself. Koutarou simply couldn't leave Kii. He couldn't overlook her being unhappy.

“Aren't I being looked down on? Do I really look that weak? …Twilight Wing, Recall – Precast Category Alpha.”

A large scythe blade was created around the top of Maya's cane. And at the same time, her whole body began glowing in colorful light. The light had been released through her keywords, and it consisted of over ten reinforcement spells that she had incanted ahead of time. She had cast some reinforcement spells on her when she had fought Koutarou before, but this time was far above that.

“You won't be able to beat me that quickly, boy.”

There were no lies in her words. Seeing Koutarou hold a weapon in his hand, Maya believed she needed powerful reinforcements. She wasn't someone that he would be able to defeat right away now.

“…I bet. But I will still defeat you right away.”

She's about as fast as Flairhan. And at the same time she does as much damage as Theia. She might even be stronger than landlord-san. What a problematic opponent…

Predicting that the upcoming fight would be intense, Koutarou readjusted his grip on the beam sabers handle. She was the kind of opponent that would be lethal if he showed her a single opening.

“Well, come at me whenever you want, boy!”

Maya swung her scythe around. It originally handled well enough, but now that her physical strength had improved she handled the scythe even better than before.

“Here I come!”

Petty tricks wouldn't work at an opponent of this level, so Koutarou charged at her from the front.

“Tiny Memory Flash – Modifier – Touch Trigger!”

As Koutarou and Maya closed in on each other, her scythe that was emitting red light was surrounded by an indigo light as well. It was a spell that erased memories.

“That thing again.”

Koutarou didn't know what it was, but he knew that once the scythe was covered by an indigo glow, strange things happened. That's why he reached the conclusion that touching it would be bad.

I believe in you Clan!

But Koutarou swung his sword, aware of the danger. Maya moved to use her scythe to protect herself. She was going to block the sword with the scythe and activate the spell.

Just like Maya had planned, the sword had been blocked by her scythe, and her spell was supposed to activate.

“What!? Could this sword be…!?”

“Good job, Clan!”

Koutarou wasn't affected by the memory loss. The indigo light dispersed as it contacted the sword, and it didn't reach him. While Maya was surprised by that, Koutarou launched repeated attacks. Since the top of his sword had struck the scythe on his first attack, he twisted his body to use the momentum to launch the grip at Maya's side.

“Quick Cast – Force Field!”

However, Maya created a shield to block Koutarou's strike. Seeing that, he jumped out of Maya's range.

Maya swung her scythe towards Koutarou's back, but the first blow had knocked her off balance and her attack didn't reach him.

“Good, I can fight like this!”

After distancing himself, Koutarou readied his sword again. Maya did the same with her scythe. However, she had an amazed expression on her face.

“I am surprised. Just what is with that sword?”

Maya had at first thought that Koutarou's sword was a capable of extending and retracting like a policeman's baton since it wasn't emitting any magic power. If it had, she would have imagined that it was a blade created from magic like her own. However, since she couldn't sense any

magic power from it, it was only obvious for her to assume it was a product of modern science. So she believed it was an extendable weapon, and since it was glowing, she assumed that electricity was running through it.

However, that wasn't the case. If it had been a product of modern science, her spell should still have activated. But since it hadn't, it meant that the sword didn't have a physical form. Since the grip and blade weren't connected, energy wouldn't transmit between them. But since she couldn't sense any magic power from the blade, that was impossible. Maya was well aware that the modern science on Earth couldn't create material without physical form. Despite that, an example of such was right in front of her. It was an unbelievable situation for Maya.

This result had been brought forth because of Clan's recommendation. When she had heard that strange things happened when Koutarou touched the scythe, she had recommended the beam sword to him. The beam sword behaved very similar to a beam cannon fired at point blank range. It was just high density energy given the form of a blade. That's why the blade and grip weren't strictly connected. Clan suspected that even if the blade connected with the scythe, nothing strange would happen.

“You are full of surprises… Isn't that sword just cheating?”

Not even a magician like Maya would imagine that it was a weapon created by aliens.

Maybe it's a blade created out of force fields designed so that it wouldn't leak magic power? But can magic power really be this thoroughly erased? And is there a merit for doing so? Or could it be that… the underground people gave him one of their weapons?

Maya tried to come up with a solution within her own range of common sense, which ended up taking her further away from the truth.

“You're telling me that? That scythe of yours is nothing but cheats.”

“I guess it means that we know nothing about each other then!”

“That's right!”

The two had only stopped for a moment. Knowing that thinking about it wouldn't get them any answers, they decided to focus on the fight at hand. Their top priority was to defeat the enemy in front of them.

Koutarou's sword and Maya's scythe clashed repeatedly. For each time their weapons formed from energy clashed, a huge flash was produced.

“It's been awhile since I've fought someone that could keep up with me in this state!”

“There are many still stronger than me!”

Choice and Result

Choice and Result

“Then I'll make sure I won't fight them!”

“A wise decision!”

Since his sword could protect him from the memory loss, Koutarou was able to put up a better fight than during their first round. Maya could now move faster, while Koutarou was more skilled and better at predicting her movements. As a result, the two were fighting evenly.

Not good, at this rate mom will die!

Koutarou was starting to panic. He was already short on time, so getting held up here would definitely lead to his mother's death. He needed to finish this up right now, but Koutarou was lacking something that would let him do such.

I am not in a good situation… If we keep fighting like this, my reinforcement magic will run out eventually… If that happens, I'm finished!

It wasn't just Koutarou; Maya was starting to panic as well. She was greatly enhancing her physique through magic, but since that consumed a lot of magic power, it would be hard to maintain it for longer periods of time. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to keep it up for much longer. The magic power that Maya had created from the ritual using Kanae's daughter was currently being stored in a crystal she had on her. If she used that, she would be able to keep the reinforcement magic for a little while longer, but that would be a major setback for her plan. If possible, she wanted to conclude this fight without having to go that far.

It'll be a gamble, but it's all I have!

I can't risk a drawn out fight, I'll have to finish it here!

Koutarou and Maya both reached their conclusion at the same time and closed in on one another.

“Let's finish this!”

The two shouted out at the same time and their weapons clashed at close range.

Their blades sparked and locked as they pushed their weapons against one another. However, it wasn't going to end there.

“Quick and Still Cast – Multiple Thunderbolt – Modifier – Maximize!”

Maya cast a new spell from this position. She sped up the cast time and omitted the gestures required while incanting, creating several thunderbolts to the maximum of her limit. Because she was maintaining several reinforcement spells, the magic power used wasn't all that much, but when fired from a locked stance at close quarters, even Koutarou would have a hard time dodging it.

But at the same time, it was a dangerous move for Maya to make. In order to protect herself from any swift attacks that Koutarou might make, she was defending herself with an automatic barrier. But since a person could only cast one spell at a time, Maya would be defenseless in the instant that she fired off this spell.

I've got you now, boy!

Even then, Maya was convinced that she had won. She was holding Koutarou's sword back with her scythe. As their blades were locked, there was no fear of a kick or punch. She should be fine even if she didn't protect herself with magic. And the electricity would assault Koutarou from close range, there was no way he could dodge it.

“Nooow!”

However, that was when Koutarou did something unexpected. He pressed a button on the grip of his beam sword and erased the blade.

“Oh n—”

Maya's eyes opened wide in surprise. At the same time, since Koutarou's sword had vanished, she ended up stepping forward. Koutarou passed under her scythe and approached her. The next moment, electricity shot through the tip of her scythe and hit nothing but empty air. Since he was between Maya and her scythe, he had avoided getting hit.

“Take thiiiiiis!”

Koutarou let his momentum carry him forward and he crashed into Maya. Like she had expected, he didn't attack with a kick or a punch.

Instead, while Maya was stunned by surprise, Koutarou's head crashed into her. Maya who had been unable to stop her own momentum got hit in the chin by Koutarou's counter attack.

Impos…sible…

Maya realized that she had been defeated. Even then, she couldn't believe this situation. Regardless of whether she believed it however, her sight darkened and her consciousness faded. She had taken massive damage, and by the time she crashed into the floor she had already lost consciousness.

“I did it…”

Koutarou lightly dropped his shoulders and checked up on Maya. Based off of her aura, he could confirm that she had fainted. It didn't look like she would be out for long, but Koutarou didn't have any time to deal with her. He had to save Kii right away and then rush to his mother.

“Kii-chan!”

“Onii-chan! Hurry! Your mom, your mom will…!”

“I know!”

Koutarou reactivated his beam sword and struck the lock of the cage Kii was in. The lock was easily destroyed and Kii jumped out of the cage.

“Hurry, hurry! Your mom is going to die!”

Kii was crying. Since she was so gentle, she worried for Koutarou's mother as much as she did for her own life. Koutarou's mother absolutely couldn't die because of her. With that powerful emotion inside of her, despite tears falling off her cheeks, she rushed ahead of Koutarou towards the parking lot's exit.

Thank you, Kii-chan…

Koutarou turned off the beam sword while staring at Kii's back. Seeing her so desperately trying to save his mother made him feel like coming to rescue her had been the right decision.

“But for now…!”

Koutarou put the beam sword between his belt and pants and chased after Kii. He didn't have the time to stop and think. He had to hurry on to his mother's side.

Maya had regained her consciousness the moment after Koutarou and Kii had started running. Thanks to the reinforcement magic she had cast on herself her regeneration had been greatly increased.

“I-I can't let her get away…”

Choice and Result

Maya could see the two moving away. After shaking her head repeatedly to clear up her mind she picked up the cane lying next to her. She was going to use magic to finish off Kii.

For her own, and for Darkness Rainbow's goals, she still needed Tayuma's power. The knowledge and technology he held would be of great help to Maya and her allies.

“E-Energy Bolt - Target Option – Sidewinder…”

Though she had recovered a bit, she still hadn't fully shaken off the damage. She was unable to properly aim for Kii with her distorted sight. That's why Maya added the ability for the spell to automatically seek its target using heat sources. Once this spell was cast, it would most likely target Kii who had a higher body temperature as she was a child.

“Go!”

A glowing red bullet shot out from her cane and it crawled along the ground, following after Kii. It quickly closed the distance to her.

“Quick Cast – Flare.”

However, just before it was about to hit Kii, the bullet suddenly changed direction and charged towards a ball of red light that had suddenly appeared.

“Angel Halo, Recall – Precast – Silence.”

And as the bullet crashed into the ball of light, they both vanished without a sound. As a result, Kii was saved without realizing what had happened. She left the parking lot with Koutarou.

“Could it be—”

“It could, Dark Navy.”

As if replacing Koutarou and Kii, another duo appeared in the parking lot.

One was a girl around ten years old, wearing a pink outfit and holding a large cane. The other was a woman in her late twenties wearing a suit and holding a bow.

It was magical girl Nana and her partner, Kanae.

“Nana… to think you'd appear now.”

“It's an unbreakable rule to complete your duty without being noticed.”

Maya slowly raised her body as Nana calmly watched her.

I have no chance to win, huh…

Maya realized her own defeat. Though Nana looked young, she was the strongest magician in Rainbow Heart. She also had an archer cooperating with her. After having taken a lot of damage from her fight with Koutarou, and with almost no magic power left, she had almost no chance to win.

“We also had to clean up after you. It took some time before we were able to release everyone.”

“I see… So that boy got here quicker than expected because you helped him.”

As she spoke, Maya carefully checked Nana's attitude. In a fight, she wouldn't have a chance so she had to find some other means of escape from this predicament.

“Navy, just surrender. If you comply, we'll at least spare your life.”

“I'll get executed either way after the trial, right? Then I'd rather die fighting.”

The magicians of Darkness Rainbow used magic to fulfill their own wishes. Apart from a few exceptions, the majority used magic to commit crimes. Maya was the same, and she had used

many people as sacrifices. On top of abusing magic, her kill streak reached over 100. Even if she surrendered she wouldn't be able to avoid the death penalty.

“Is that so? I thought you were a bit smarter than that.”

“Smarter…?”

Maya and Nana stared at each other. During that time, Maya desperately racked her brain. She could feel like Nana was implying something.

Smarter… does she mean that I could escape after being caught? Or could she mean… no, more importantly, why is Nana saying this?

Maya looked back at Nana, who was reaching her hand out towards her.

“However, regardless of what you'll do, you're going to give me the focus gem you created from the ritual.”

A focus gem was a gem that would occasionally emit light in all the colors of the rainbow. This gem served as a storage for the magic power created from the ritual and it contained vast amounts of it. Nana had her hand reached out to retrieve that gem from Maya.

“You don't mind, do you?”

The edges of Nana's lips lifted as she said that.

I see, so that's what she means… The circumstances for an ally of justice are complicated…

Smart. Focus Gem.

It was then that Maya understood what Nana was trying to tell her with those two keywords.

“Okay, I'll give you the gem.”

Having understood Nana's circumstances, the edges of her lips lifted just like Nana.

Really… not only is her magic skills to be feared, but her bargaining skills as well… Is this girl really just ten years old?

Maya was amazed on the inside, but without saying anything she joined in on Nana's plot.

“Isn't that great, Kanae-san.”

“Yes! Thank you, Nana-chan!”

Having learned that they would obtain the focus gem, it wasn't Nana who was rejoiced but Kanae. She was actually the one after it.

“Here, this is the gem! Catch!”

Maya pulled out the gem and threw it towards Kanae. The gem flew towards her in a large arc, but as it reached the top of its arc it let out a dazzling flash.

“Kya!?”

Kanae who was staring directly at it was blinded by the flash and temporarily lost her vision.

Because of that, she missed catching the gem and it rolled along the floor.

“Oh no!”

Afraid that Maya would steal it back, she jumped onto the ground and looked for the gem. However, since she couldn't see it, wasn't quite easy for her to find it.

If I don't hurry, that girl and Soutarou-san will be in danger!

Choice and Result

Kanae panicked. If Maya managed to steal the gem back, she would be able to fulfill her goal. With the time limit closing in she had to obtain the gem at any cost.

“…It's okay, Kanae-san. The gem is right here.”

Kanae looked in the direction of Nana's voice, there she could vaguely see a pink colored outfit. She was gradually regaining her vision, but she still couldn't see clearly. But she was certain that she was looking at Nana.

“Where is she!? Where did that woman go!?”

Kanae blinked repeatedly and looked around the area.

“She ran off, using that flash to hide her escape.”

“Nana-chan, was it okay to let her go?”

This was a mysterious situation for Kanae. Based on Nana's attitude, she hadn't been very affected by the flash. Despite that, she hadn't chased after Maya as she fled. Considering Nana's position, that was something unbelievable.

“Yes, this is that kind of deal.”

“Deal?”

Kanae had now almost fully recovered her sight. And in the center of her view she saw a girl wearing a pink outfit. She was holding the gem that shined in all colors of the rainbow and calmly looked and smiled at Kanae.

“What do you mean?”

“In exchange for Navy not doing anything to this gem, I let her go.”

Nana answered Kanae with a smile. She then put the gem in Kanae's hands.

“If we had fought, Navy would have almost certainly used the magic power in the gem.”

“Ah…”

“But if she did something like that, your daughter wouldn't survive. That's why I let her escape in exchange for the gem. That's the kind of deal we made.”

Of course, that wasn't everything. If Nana had fallen for the flash as well, Maya might have made one last bet. However, since that hadn't happened, Maya left without doing anything. It was Nana's victory.

“Thank you Nana-chan. For my sake…”

“Don't worry about it. I didn't just let her run away.”

A spell was currently pursuing Navy. After Nana had finished her work here, she was going to chase Maya down.

“It looks like Navy has taken a lot of damage, and she has also lost her altar and gem. Not even she can pull off something major again right away. I only need to capture her before she can do anything.”

“But, won't they get angry at you, Nana-chan?”

Nana was a magician that was a part of Folsaria's regular army, Rainbow Heart. Letting an enemy escape was a major violation.

“What could I do? She managed to escape while the flash blinded me.”

Choice and Result

Nana smiled brightly. She was going to tell the top brass that Maya had managed to escape by blinding her.

“I see… so she also did it for that…”

One could say that Maya using a method like that to escape was part of the deal. If she hadn't made it look like she was escaping, Nana would have punished her. That's because according to Nana's actual mission, she should have ignored the gem and defeated Maya. But if that happened, Kanae would be unable to fulfill her goal. That's why Nana had struck a deal with Maya. It was a last resort of sorts. Being an ally of justice put her in a difficult position.

“Now then, Kanae-san, let's go home after destroying this altar. We have to return the magic power in that gem to your daughter as quickly as possible.”

As Nana said that she raised her cane above her head. She was going to use a power attack spell to destroy the altar. And while Kanae watched on, she strongly held the gem and began feeling anxious.

“Will that girl survive…?”

“I'm sorry. To be honest, I don't know either. But she shouldn't die right away. I can at least guarantee that.”

Kanae's daughter's spiritual energy had forcibly been drained for her body, converted into magic power and stored in that gem. Maya had used a portion of that magic power, and when the magic power was converted into spiritual energy, there was no guarantee that it would properly attach to Kanae's daughter. However, if they destroyed the central piece of that ritual, the gem, after returning the magic power, Kanae's daughter should be able to escape from the effects of the ritual. With the leak of spiritual energy stopping, her life should be saved. Kanae's husband would escape from the hazardous situation as well.

“I am really sorry. This is all because you got involved in our fight…”

“It's unfortunate, but there is no need for you to feel responsible. You're still young enough to be a child…”

Kanae's daughter might not be able to live for long. However, Kanae wasn't going to blame Nana for that. Dark Navy was the one who was wrong, and no matter how strong she may be, Nana was still a child. Kanae couldn't criticize Nana who was almost as old as her own daughter.

“Thank you, Kanae-san…”

“Don't cry, Nana-chan. It's not your fault…”

Kanae gently embraced Nana.

The biggest reason for why Kanae didn't blame Nana was because of the bond they had formed during the days they had spent together. This small girl was continuing her fight all alone. Knowing that, Kanae couldn't leave Nana be. Right now, she thought of Nana like her own daughter. And as a partner, she had spent good times and bad with her.

“…I'm casting a spell, Kanae-san…”

“Right, sorry for getting in your way. I'm sorry, Nana-chan…:”

Thus the two destroyed Dark Navy's plot and successfully saved Kanae's daughter.

What Was Put Into the Necklace

Part 1

Having jumped out of the parking lot of the abandoned building, Koutarou set his eyes straight at the site of the accident where his mother had died. He didn't look around him. He ignored traffic lights and he bumped into people; he ignored all of that and pressed forward. The time was already 7PM. Koutarou's memories told him that the accident had occurred shortly after 7. Since he wasn't sure of the exact time, he couldn't say if he'd make it or not. That's why Koutarou bet everything on that small chance that she was still alive.

That corner, it's just around that corner!

Koutarou was now just a little bit away from the site of the accident. His heart was racing, his lungs screamed for oxygen and his legs were slowing down from exhaustion. The sound of his pulse was so noisy that he could barely hear anything else. However, Koutarou pushed all of that aside and continued forward. Just around the corner, his mother was about to die in an accident. It wasn't the time to worry about his own worry.

Alright, I just turn here!

Koutarou slowed down a little to turn the corner. As he did, he could hear the loud screech of a siren behind him and a large white van was approaching. The van turned the corner at the same time as Koutarou did and passed him.

'Harukaze City Hospital'

That was what was written on the side of the white van. A red warning light shone at the top of the van that had sirens blaring. There was no doubting it, that was an ambulance.

There was a large crowd gathered in the direction that the ambulance was heading. The people were gathered around something. In the middle of the crowd there was a stopped car that had slammed into the guard rail. Right next to it was a lone boy. The boy was embracing a half-knit sweater and was sitting down on the road. Around him was a basket woven out of bamboo and the knitting tools in it had been scattered around. A woman lay collapsed in front of the boy. The woman looked like she was floating as she lay on top of a red pool of liquid.

“Ah…”

The moment Koutarou saw that, he stopped. Strength left his body and he froze. Koutarou simply stood there and watched the development. The emergency personnel passed by the boy and rushed towards the fallen woman. The crowd continued growing and Koutarou could no longer see the boy, the woman or the emergency personnel.

“Bertorion…”

A woman appeared next to Koutarou's side. She was wearing glasses and a long dress.

“I am very sorry… by the time I got here, it was already…”

Like she had said, Clan had an apologetic expression on her face.

After Clan had guided Koutarou to the abandoned building, she followed his simple directions in search for the site of the accident. However, she had a hard time finding it with the short description she had gotten, and by the time she finally found it, the accident had already happened.

Hearing Clan's apology, Koutarou lost all strength and sat down where he was standing. He looked the same as the boy who was embracing the half-knit sweater.

“Onii-chan! Onee-chan!”

What Was Put Into the Necklace

That was when Kii caught up. Koutarou had left Kii to Clan's observation device and rushed on ahead. Because of that, she had appeared a little later.

“What happened to your mom!?”

Kii still didn't know what had happened. But she had gotten a bad feeling when she saw Koutarou sitting down. But she didn't want to believe in that feeling.

“…We didn't make it in time…”

Clan spoke to Kii in a sorrowful tone and shook her head.

“No! Then did Onii-chan's mom die!?”

Kii screamed out and tears filled her eyes. She didn't want to accept that Koutarou's mother had died.

I didn't make it… mom died… again…

Kii's scream carved the reality into the frozen Koutarou's heart. And then the memories of the days after his mother had died surged into his head all at once.

Koutarou's mother had died leaving behind a half-knit sweater. Like Kii, Koutarou searched for his mother, and his father took to alcohol to drown out his sorrows. Koutarou's relationship with his father grew worse, and it took a long time to repair that relationship. They were fine now, but Koutarou had to mature before that could happen.

One could say that Koutarou's childhood was lonely. Once he got home, he would be all alone. Being all alone in a house full of memories of his mother was hard. His father didn't get back until the night. Both Koutarou and his father had a hard time adjusting to the fact that they had suddenly lost their mother and wife respectively. As a result, a long time passed before they could properly reconcile. Before time and his friends could heal his heart, Koutarou spent a long time alone. This was also one of the reasons for why he had devoted himself to baseball.

All those memories of his childhood revived in Koutarou and he was overcome with deep loneliness and an intense sense of loss. Koutarou had lost his mother once more.

“Damnit, I couldn't save her! I couldn't save mom!”

Koutarou slammed his fist into the hard concrete. The strong blow tore his skin and blood poured out. It was possible that the flowing blood was a replacement for tears.

“I was just a little bit away!”

Koutarou continued pounding his fist into the concrete, not giving a single care for the blood flowing out. He felt that if he didn't do that, his heart would break into pieces. It was only because he hurt himself like that he was able to maintain his sanity.

“Even if you call me a knight, I can't save anyone! History is still the same! GOD DAMMIT!”

Koutarou screamed. The sight of his mother dying in front of him once more was more painful than he could ever imagine. He couldn't save anyone. He couldn't be of help to anyone. Everything proceeded as if according to a script or history. Koutarou couldn't do anything. Overcome with that despairing feeling of helplessness, solitude and sense of loss, Koutarou looked like he would shatter if he was even touched.

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Onii-chan!”

However, there was someone who was protecting Koutarou as he looked like he'd fall apart. It was the young girl, Kii, who had desperately chased after Koutarou.

Not caring for her own clothes being bloodied, she held Koutarou's fist by her chest and embraced it with all her might. It was as if she was going to accept all of the feelings in his fist.

What Was Put Into the Necklace

“It's, It's all Kii's fault! If Kii hadn't run away from home, Onii-chan's mother…! Onii-chan's mother would still…!”

Kii couldn't stop herself from doing so as her soul screamed.

She felt responsible, she felt that it was all her fault that Koutarou's mother had died because Maya had captured her. And looking back at it, she had been captured because she ran away from home. Kii's selfish actions had deeply hurt Koutarou, which was a massive failure for Kii.

Kii understood Koutarou's feelings more than anyone. They were the same feelings that she had felt before she found her mother's star. She had felt the same despair and solitude herself.

More than anything however, Kii loved Koutarou. That was surely the young girl's immature first love. Her pure emotions screamed at her that she couldn't leave Koutarou alone. Something deep inside her screamed at her to save him.

“I promise you, Onii-chan! Kii will never let you feel lonely! Kii will always be by your side! So, so…!”

Just like Koutarou had healed her heart, Kii felt that it was now her turn to heal his. Since she loved him more than anyone else, she accepted that role. She would always stay by his side so he wouldn't feel lonely. She would learn how to cook, she would do the cleaning and washing. She would do all of the things a mother would do. She wanted to pour her warmth into Koutarou. She believed that together they could save each other from solitude.

“So, please don't cry! You're not lonely, Kii is here! Kii will always protect you, Onii-chan!”

Tears scattered as Kii screamed.

The pure, warm and gentle emotions jumped into the Koutarou's heart. And they gently wrapped his frozen and cracked heart.

“Kii-chan…”

Kii's desperateness barely kept Koutarou's heart from breaking. Thanks to that, he managed to calm down a little. It wasn't like the sorrow of losing his mother had vanished, but he managed to recover from the shock of losing his mother twice.

Kii's clothes were dyed red with his blood, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Her body shook and her voice was desperate.

All of that let Koutarou know that he wasn't alone. At the same time, it turned into the power he needed to be able to stand up again.

“…Thank you, Kii-chan. I feel a little better… thanks to you.”

Koutarou somehow managed to smile at Kii.

“Onii-chan…”

After showing a stiff expression, Kii always showed a smile.

“I-I'm so glad… I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Onii-chan… I am really, really sorry…”

Kii reached out and touched Koutarou's cheek. She gently wiped his tears away. Relieved to see Koutarou act like that, she let out tears of relief. But Koutarou wiped her tears away as well.

“You don't need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong.”

“But, but!”

“It's okay. Thank you, Kii-chan.”

“Onii-chan! Uaaaa, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

What Was Put Into the Necklace

Deeply moved, Kii threw herself at Koutarou and hugged him.

She cried for my sake…

Koutarou embraced Kii's trembling body, gently patted her back and felt grateful that she had cried for him.

And thanks to her crying first, he somehow managed to choke back his tears.

What Was Put Into the Necklace

Part 2

After Kii had finished crying, she fell asleep from exhaustion and from the deep relief while still hugging Koutarou. Carrying her, he headed towards the Cradle.

“She really is a child. Look how well she's sleeping.”

“She should still have childish parts like this. She's too good of a child.”

“That's true. If she's always awake, I would lose my turn to console you.”

“You're awfully childish about the weirdest things.”

“Shut it!”

By now, Koutarou had managed to recover to his usual state. The grief hadn't vanished, but he somehow supported himself thanks to Kii's and Clan's help.

I'm really grateful, Clan. I'm glad we're together…

When Koutarou thought of being alone here, he was overcome with gratitude for Clan. The reason he didn't say that directly was because of the distance between them. He was a little embarrassed about telling Clan his honest feelings.

And this might be for the best for Clan…

If he had saved his mother, Clan would lose her place to return to. That fact also helped easing his grief. She was an important friend to him. While he grieved for his mother, he also felt like he should be happy that his friend would be alright.

“By the way, Clan, what do we do now?”

“I've finished my calculation, but wait a little for our departure.”

“Why?”

“This girl found out the location of the Cradle, right? After we get her home, I'm moving its position.”

“Okay, I'll leave that to you. I better practice my acting, so you don't have to hurry.”

“Oh yeah, there was that thing too.”

As Koutarou and Clan discussed the future, they entered the mountain where the Cradle was buried. Since they would be walking on a paved path for a while, it wouldn't be very difficult to traverse. Kii didn't wake up as they started the climb.

As Koutarou and Clan had made it about halfway up the mountain, the bracelet on Clan's right arm sounded off an alarm.

“Warning. An unidentified group is approaching from ten o'clock. Forces four, threat of weaponry is low, energy reaction is also low. Maintaining threat level one.”

“Bertorion, someone is coming.”

“Looks like it.”

Though slightly behind, Koutarou also noticed that.

They don't seem to be very hostile, but…

Koutarou's ability to see spiritual energy was growing weaker, but he could feel the presence of four people approaching.

“It might be best to wake that girl up.”

What Was Put Into the Necklace

“Yeah.”

A mysterious group was approaching them from the left. There was no path in that direction, only an abundance of trees and bushes. It was hard to imagine it would be someone gathering mushrooms and plants at this hour, so they decided to at least stay on guard.

“Kii-chan. Wake up, Kii-chan.”

“Mm, Mmmm~”

Koutarou lightly shook Kii's body while calling out to her, and she soon began moving. She moved her arm that was around Koutarou's neck and rubbed her eyes.

“Good morning, Onii-chan? What is it?”

“Some strange people are coming. They don't seem like enemies, but we thought it would be best to wake you up.”

“I see.”

Kii seemed satisfied with the explanation and got off of Koutarou and nodded. And while rubbing her drowsy eyes, she looked to the left hand side. A bush in front of her shook and four men appeared.

There was an elderly man in the front with three men behind him and all of them were wearing expensive brand suits. Based on how the man was moving and the three were following him, it looked like they were the elderly man's guards.

“Uncle!?”

“My lady!”

When the men stepped on the asphalt road, Kii and the elderly man shouted out at the same time. The elderly man then panicked and ran towards Koutarou and the others.

“I finally found you, my lady!”

Upon seeing Kii, the elderly man showed a big smile and ran as fast as he could. He didn't seem to care who Koutarou and Clan were at all.

“Kouma-sama, please wait! We don't know who the others are yet!”

“As if I care! My ladyyy!”

The three behind him seemed cautious to who Koutarou and Clan were, so they hurriedly tried to stop the elderly man. However, he completely ignored them. The three men looked at each other and reluctantly chased after him.

“Kii-chan, do you know them?”

Based on the elderly mans and Kii's reaction, Koutarou vaguely understood that they weren't enemies. But since Kii's life had been targeted he remained cautious.

“Yes. It's uncle Kouma who works in my house.”

“Like I thought, she seems to be the daughter of an influential family.”

At the same time as Koutarou learned of the other's identity, the elderly man called Kouma reached Kii. He then squatted down in front of her and matched her eye level.

They seem okay…

Seeing Kouma squat down and match Kii's eye level, Koutarou decided that Kouma wasn't a dangerous person, and the tension built up inside of him released.

What Was Put Into the Necklace

“Just where have you been these three days!? I was very worried and looked for you all over!”

“I'm sorry, uncle…”

Kii apologized to Kouma who was in tears. It was now that she understood what her selfishness had caused.

“Of course, the master also worried for you. I desperately stopped him when he said that he would go look for you himself, and that's why I came here looking.”

“Dad did…?”

“The master heard that someone was after your life, and he had to use everything at his disposal to keep his enemies at bay. He was in no way not worried about you.”

Kii's father noticed that his political adversaries would try to use the fact that Kii had run away from home to sway the public opinion. Kii's father hadn't found out that Tayuma was the mastermind and that he was using Maya to target Kii, but he used everything he could to keep his political adversaries at bay. Because of that, nobody could move except for Tayuma and Maya.

And in exchange for Kii's father who couldn't move as he held his adversaries back, Kouma, his trusted vassal, was sent to look for Kii. This was Kii's father's best efforts to protect her.

“Uhm, about that.”

Koutarou who had been watching over the two, opened his mouth. There was something he had to tell Kouma.

“This girl, Kii-chan, was just attacked by some stranger. So please take her somewhere safe as fast as possible.”

“Onii-chan!?”

Kii's eyes opened wide from Koutarou's words. However, Kouma's reaction was even more exaggerated.

“I-Is that true!? We can't stay here! You guys, secure our surroundings! And contact the master!”

“Understood!”

Kouma gave out orders and the men behind him sprung into action at once. One of them used some kind of device to survey his surroundings, and pulled out a small gun. The third used a communication device and contacted somebody. They were preparing for an ambush and at the same time planning their retreat.

“I somehow managed to protect her, but she might come back again… so please hurry.”

Koutarou and Clan didn't know who Maya was. All they could imagine was that she was an assassin that Kii's father's political adversary had sent. They didn't know what was going on behind the scenes or if they might still be under pursuit. There was a limit to how well Koutarou and Clan could protect Kii. So they wanted to hurry to take Kii somewhere safe.

“I see… Normally I would like to formally thank you, but since this is an urgent matter we will take our leave. Please excuse my impoliteness.”

Kouma politely bowed his head towards Koutarou. In response Koutarou nodded.

“I think that's for the best. So please don't worry about it.”

Koutarou could vaguely understand the circumstances, so he agreed with Kouma's actions. They should take Kii somewhere safe as quickly as possible.

“I am most grateful.”

What Was Put Into the Necklace

Hearing Koutarou's words, Kouma bowed once more. This was the most gratitude that he was able to express at the moment.

“My lady, let us go.”

“No! I won't go back!”

Despite Koutarou and Kouma having come to an understanding, Kii herself was for some reason fiercely shaking her head. This surprised both of them.

“What's the matter, Kii-chan. Didn't you say you'd go home before?”

“M-My lady, why!?”

Koutarou tilted his head and Kouma grabbed Kii's shoulders with his eyes wide open. They were greatly surprised. Especially Koutarou, who had heard Kii say she was going home just before. He couldn't understand why she had suddenly changed her mind.

“That's because I promised Onii-chan! That I would be with you! Kii will protect you so that you won't feel lonely!”

“Kii-chan…”

Kii had changed her mind because of Koutarou. Just a moment ago when he had lost his mother, she had cheered him up by saying she would stay with him. Since she didn't want that to be a lie, she tried to stay by his side.

“…It's okay, Kii-chan.”

Koutarou squatted down next to Kii and put his hand on her shoulder. Seeing that, Kouma decided to leave the convincing to Koutarou and took some distance from them.

“It's not okay! Onii-chan did so much for me, so now it's my turn!”

Even when Koutarou spoke to her she fiercely shook her head and she began tearing up.

“Kii promised to protect you! I definitely won't go home!”

“Kii-chan, you've already protected me enough. Don't you get it? I'm only able to cheerfully talk like this thanks to you.”

Koutarou had lost his mother twice. The one to ease his pain had been Kii. It was because she had lost her own mother that her feelings had reached him. That's why Koutarou could confidently say that Kii had protected him more than enough. And the tears she had shed at that time still remained within him and protected him.

“That's why it's okay. Thank you, Kii-chan. I am really grateful.”

“Onii-chan…”

Kii spoke a little quieter.

Since Kii was clever and sensitive to others feelings, she understood how Koutarou felt. That's why Kii also understood that he wasn't lying now. He wasn't making it up to get Kii to go home.

Because of that, her argument lost its momentum. She understood that it was time for the two to part ways.

“I will never forget that you cried for my sake. And as long as I don't, I won't be alone. Right?”

“Yeah…”

Kii would return home, and Koutarou would do the same.

But the bond the two had formed wouldn't disappear. As long as they didn't forget the time they spent together, neither Koutarou nor Kii would be alone. Knowing that there was someone that understood them out there somewhere, they would be able to confidently walk down their respective paths.

Though for that other party to be a six-year-old girl that's just like me…

While amazed that he had been cheered up by a six-year-old girl, Koutarou was grateful that he had met her and at the same time he was sad that they would part ways. So he at the very least prayed that her future would be bright.

“Take care, Kii-chan.”

“…Yeah. You too, Onii-chan.”

“Yeah. I will be okay.”

“That's a lie. Kii knows that you're weak, Onii-chan.”

“And as long as you know that, I will be okay.”

“Aha, this is almost like a confession.”

“It's pretty similar. I'm exposing my weakness after all.”

“That's true.”

A smile finally appeared on Kii's lips. She had been able to accept that it was time to part ways. Sensing that, Kouma who had been watching from the sidelines opened his mouth.

“My lady, it's about time…”

“I know. But just wait a little.”

The time to part was near. Kii knew that as well. She had no more intention of being selfish, but she had one more thing she had to do.

“Onii-chan, take this.”

Kii lightly pulled down the clothes around her chest and pulled out a necklace. The necklace had polished jewels and fangs and was strung together by a colorful string. It had a unique beauty, different than modern accessories. It was simple, but had a powerful beauty to it, and it suited Kii very well.

“I want you to hold on to this, Onii-chan.”

Kii removed it from her own neck and presented it to Koutarou.

“My lady, that's…”

Kouma instinctively tried to stop Kii. He knew just what that action would mean to her.

“I know, that's why.”

“…If you are aware, then I will not speak any further.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

What Was Put Into the Necklace

What Was Put Into the Necklace

Kii smiled and nodded at Kouma and handed the necklace to Koutarou.

“Here, Onii-chan. Think of this as Kii and take good care of it.”

“Are you sure? Isn't this something precious to you?”

Based on how the necklace looked and how Kouma had reacted, Koutarou understood that it was something valuable. And if that was actually correct, if Koutarou had heard what it was worth, he would definitely had tried to give it back to Kii.

“Yes, this is my thanks for the card! From today, this will protect you instead of Kii! And… I would be happy if you looked at it from time to time and thought of Kii.”

In Kii's hometown there was a certain custom. That was that two people who had pledged to marry one another would exchange items they regularly wore as proof of their engagement.

Kii had gotten a card from Koutarou, so Kii decided to give Koutarou her mother's keepsake. Kii had been able to find the star and meet her mother again. She no longer needed to look for her mother in the necklace. She believed that it would be better if she gave the necklace to Koutarou and have her mother protect him. Those were the two meanings this present had.

However, Kii had no intention of telling Koutarou that. Since he lived somewhere else, he didn't understand the meaning of this action. And they wouldn't be able to meet again for a while. That's why she didn't want to push her feelings onto him. She had learned what selfish actions could cause.

That's why she would tell him everything when she met Koutarou again. And she hoped that he would remember her and accept her feelings. Until then, it would be a promise with herself. Koutarou only needed to think of the necklace as a lucky charm.

“I understand. Thank you, Kii-chan.”

“Yes! Make sure you take care of it!”

She had now done everything she wanted. Satisfied with that, Kii smiled. Her smile was so very mature it was hard to think of her as a six-year-old girl. During these three days, she had grown immensely. Kii's childhood would surely be reaching its end now.

“Okay, then I'm going now.”

Kii kept her smile and waved her hand. Her smile looked a little lonely, but there was no sadness in it.

“Yeah. See you.”

“Take care, young lady.”

Koutarou and Clan saw Kii off with a smile. Kouma bowed towards Koutarou and Clan once more the other three men then did the same. The time for parting had finally come.

“Good bye, Onii-chan! Onee-chan!”

Kii was pulled away by Kouma and walked away. They had left in the same direction as Kouma and the three men had come from. Kii continued waving towards Koutarou and Clan until she could no longer see them.

“Goodbye! Let's meet again!”

There was no guarantee that they would be able to met Kii again. If anything, the chance for it was very small because they would now be returning to the future. And even if they did, Kii would probably not recognize Koutarou. But there was no need for them to say that.

What Was Put Into the Necklace

“Wait for me! When Kii grows up I will definitely come back to you, Onii-chan! So wait for me, Onii-chan! I love you!”

However, as Koutarou looked at Kii's expression, he began thinking that he might meet her again some day.

Kii's smile was so bright that it was overflowing with her desire to meet him again.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Part 1

February 14, Sunday

February 14, it was Sunday and Valentine's Day. On top of that, an event celebrating Valentine's Day was being held. Despite it being cold, there were many people in the amusement park. So there were many families and couples surrounding Koutarou and Kiriha. They were all smiling and enjoying the holiday.

“Kiriha-san, where are we going today? You said you had found a clue.”

“Calm down, Satomi Koutarou. There is a proper procedure to these things.”

Koutarou had been taken to the amusement park by Kiriha when she had asked him to help her to find someone. Since he had already helped her look many times, he readily agreed. Koutarou considered Kiriha to be a precious friend, so he had no reason to refuse. On top of that, Kiriha was looking for her first love. He couldn't keep himself from helping her. And since she had said that she had found a clue, Koutarou was very enthusiastic about going looking.

When they entered the amusement park, Kiriha began walking to lead the way. They were definitely heading towards the attractions inside, but Kiriha wasn't telling Koutarou her plans for some reason. Confused, Koutarou had asked her, but she had dodged it with a smile. And that's where they are at now.

Still… I'm getting a strange feeling about this…

Koutarou chased after Kiriha's back while being caught up in a strange sensation. Since they had left Corona House in the afternoon, the sun was already setting. The orange sun created long shadows. That sight stimulated Koutarou's memories, and he felt that he had seen this before.

Well, I've come here several times before, so…

This wasn't the first time that Koutarou had come here with Kiriha. In fact, he had been here with her several times. One time under the pretense of a date, and a couple more times to look for someone. The date had left quite an impression, so it was only obvious for him to have memories of it. However, as the two walked, he remembered some other memories, apart from the ones with her. It was a memory of a far off day and it had been a serious event that had greatly developed Koutarou's mind. While he scanned his memories, he chased after Kiriha.

“Here it is.”

Kiriha stopped in front of a certain attraction. She then turned around towards Koutarou and showed a cheerful smile. It was a pure and bright smile. It was completely different from what she normally showed, and it was like the smile of the children standing in line for the attraction.

“This is…”

The attraction they were standing in front of was the roller coaster. When Koutarou looked up he could see people shoot by and spin and twist on coaster. This was the most popular attraction in the amusement park.

“I was thinking that we should ride this today.”

“Wait, didn't you decide to ride this with your first love? Or did you give up?”

Kiriha was planning on riding the roller coaster. However, Koutarou objected. In the past, they had decided that Kiriha would ride this with her first love. If she gave up on looking, or if her first love had rejected her, she would then ride it with Koutarou. Because of that, Koutarou couldn't agree.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

“You're wrong. I may have found him. My Onii-chan, who I had always been thinking of…”

My Onii-chan.

When Kiriha said those words, a different person's appearance overlapped with hers.

“I've decided! Onii-chan, let's ride on that next!”

“That thing spinning round and round and zooming by!”

It was the appearance of a young girl that had just turned six years old. A girl he had met about half a month ago and had spent a few days with. She soon vanished and Kiriha returned, but Koutarou had definitely caught a glimpse of that girl.

Could it be… no, that's impossible… do such coincidences even exist…?

Koutarou was speechless. An idea was forming in his head, but he quickly denied it.

It wasn't like he hadn't thought of it before. He had considered the possibility. But it was something with such a low chance of being true that he considered it a delusion. Even Koutarou could understand that the cause appearing after the result was impossible.

That's why he didn't know what to do. Confused, all he could do was stand in place.

And as Koutarou was speechless, Kiriha smiled and began to slowly speak.

“Ever since I came up on the surface, I had always been looking for him using the wrong method. That's why I couldn't find him.”

Kiriha spoke differently from normal. She was still polite, but no longer as formal, she spoke as a normal girl. But Koutarou didn't find that strange, something deep inside him told him that was natural. And considering Kiriha's age, this way of speaking was more apt. She was normally too mature.

“The person I met ten years ago was the same age I was now. That's why I assumed that at her youngest, his mother would be in her thirties, but she would most likely have been in her forties. Using that as a clue, I looked in the records for women who had been in traffic accidents, but I couldn't find her.”

Kiriha had tried to find her first love through the traffic accident. Assuming that her first love had been around 15 years old, it was only natural for her to add at least another 15 to his mother's age. That's why she had investigated all of the women who had died in traffic accidents at the age of 30 and up. As a result, she had found a few that matched the description, but she hadn't been able to find her first love.

“I also used other methods. But I just couldn't find him no matter how I tried. I began thinking that he might not even have existed to begin with, like he was just a dream…”

Kiriha had looked into other records as well, but had the same result. She just couldn't find her first love. That irritated her, and she began to doubt if her precious memories were even real.

“But… but you know? The day before yesterday, I found this…”

Kiriha's eyes filled with tears and she put her hand in the purse she was carrying with her. And she pulled out a certain something from it.

“Thanks to this, I finally understood why I couldn't find him… why his mother didn't exist in the records…”

Kiriha showed an antique necklace with polished jewels and fangs.

“…T-That's…”

Roller Coaster at Dusk

The moment he saw that, Koutarou held his breath. The necklace she was holding was a memorabilia that he had hidden in his wardrobe. The reason why she had taken that out and why she said she had solved the mystery proved that Koutarou's imagination was correct.

“There was no way I would have found him. That's because that person was still only 6…”

Kiriha's first assumption had been wrong. If the child had been six years old, she should have added in women in their twenties. But Kiriha hadn't done so, and for obvious reasons. Although he might have been six in the register, he was 16 when she met him. Who would have imagined such an irrational situation?

“I gave this necklace to that person when we parted ways.”

If she assumed the person had been six at the age of the accident, only one person fit the description. Kiriha had already confirmed that, and she had also found the necklace as evidence. All that was left was for her to confirm one last thing.

“I gave it to him as thanks for this card.”

Kiriha pulled out a card from her purse.

It was a metallic trading card. However, it has lost its sheen as time had passed. The card depicted a hero based on a beetle posing.

Koutarou had seen that card and the letters written on it before. It looked just the same as the card a six-year-old girl he had only met half a month ago had.

“This necklace is a keepsake from my mother. I gave it to him, hoping that my mother would watch over him so he wouldn't feel lonely and cry on his own.”

Kiriha was crying now. She had never displayed any intense emotion in public before, but now she was crying without caring about her surroundings. Her expression seemed happy, but sad. It seemingly contained all kinds of emotions. And that intense emotion turned into tears and streamed out of her eyes. The tears ran down her cheeks and were lit up by the gentle light of the setting sun.

“I had always been worried these past ten years. Was he happy? He's not feeling lonely is he?”

It was as if Kiriha was unable to control her own emotions. Her body was trembling and she was weak at the knees. Just standing up was the best she could muster. She looked like she would collapse onto the ground if someone so much as touched her shoulders.

“So, please tell me, Koutarou! Is the owner of this necklace currently happy? He's not feeling lonely… is he?”

That was the real reason for why Kiriha had looked for her first love. Before confessing her own feelings, she wanted to know if he was happy.

Kiriha still loved him, but she didn't demand that he did the same. He had his own life, he might have a lover, or he might even have built a family. Kiriha had no intention of forcing herself into his life. Just conveying her feelings was enough for her.

But she wanted to know if he was happy, and make sure that he wasn't feeling lonely, no matter what. That was the feelings behind the reason for her giving away her necklace, and what she had wished for as she looked on her card. Before she could make sure of that, she couldn't move forward; she couldn't chase after her own happiness.

“…Could you stand over there for a moment?”

Koutarou didn't answer Kiriha's desperate appeal. Instead he smiled and pointed to something behind her. With a calm expression and tone he had somehow returned to normal.

“Eh…? O-Okay…”

While Koutarou had regained his calm, Kiriha's mind had become completely disorderly. She wanted to hear his answer and the unexpected turn of events confused her.

“Like this?”

While her feelings with still in a disarray, Kiriha obediently followed Koutarou's instructions. Koutarou had pointed at a signboard in front of the roller coaster, and Kiriha moved in front of it.

“Yeah, just like that.”

As Kiriha stood there and waited, Koutarou approached her.

“Ah…”

As Koutarou approached, Kiriha's body stiffened, and at the same time she instinctively grasped the card and necklace she had in her hands. It wasn't like Kiriha wasn't anxious, even if she had proof, she wasn't completely sure. That's why she looked at what Koutarou was doing.

“Hmm…”

Though Kiriha was anxious, Koutarou smiled and nodded. However, he wasn't looking at her but at something behind her. Wondering why, Kiriha turned around and noticed what he was looking at.

'To ride on this attraction you need to be at least 140 centimeters'

That was what written on the signboard behind her. The height limit had been written with large characters on the side of the signboard and next to it was a large illustration that showed the height of 140 centimeters.

Koutarou looked at it and then cheerfully put his hand on top of Kiriha's head.

“…You've gotten so big, Kii-chan.”

Koutarou said that out loud as he looked at Kiriha. And at the same time he gently patted her head a few times.

“Ah…”

It was at that moment that Kiriha realized that her imagination had been correct. At the same time, her emotions exploded and she stumbled for words. Kiriha desperately tried to say something, but her mouth simply opened and closed with no words coming out.

“If you're this tall it looks like we'll be able to ride it this time.”

The illustration only reached up to Kiriha's shoulders.

With this the clerk won't stop us like that time…

Koutarou remembered the time when they had been stopped and he said to her.

“I couldn't tell it was you, really.”

“O-Onii-cha… you really are Onii-chan, right?”

Tears began overflowing from Kiriha's eyes again. Her body began shaking little by little.

“Yeah. That's right.”

Koutarou firmly nodded. He had also been surprised by this result, but he wasn't as shaken as Kiriha since it had only been about half a month for him. And the Kii, Kiriha, crying in front of him had grown big. He knew that she had cried for him, which is why whenever she cried in front of

him, he felt like he had to keep himself together. Because of that, he could gently watch over Kiriha.

“Ah…”

Strength left Kiriha's knees and she lost balance. Since she was being swung around by her strong emotions, she couldn't recover from her collapsed balance and looked like she was about to fall over.

“Hey now.”

However, before she could, Koutarou held her body.

You're still light, despite having grown so much, Kii-chan…

Having been able to support the girl that had supported him made Koutarou happy. As Koutarou was pleased with himself, Kiriha put her arms around Koutarou and held him.

“…It's Onii-chan… you really were Onii-chan…”

Kiriha completely entrusted herself to Koutarou like a small child wanting to be doted on by her parents. So Koutarou readjusted his hold on her body to properly support her.

“…Back then you were more of a tomboy, and less like this.”

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Koutarou supported Kiriha while smiling wryly. Right now, she looked even younger than Kii had.

To think she really was Kii-chan though…

Kii who had been hiding inside of Kiriha had now come out into the open. Up until now, Kii had peeked through a few times before, and Koutarou knew what Kii was like, so he didn't find it to be unnatural. Of course he had been surprised at first, and he still was, but his feelings were content. Because of that, Kiriha and Kii naturally began melding into a single person.

“Stupid… even if it's only been half a month for you, it's been over ten years for me, Onii-chan. Can't you just let me stay like this a little longer…”

Kiriha's arms were firmly swung around Koutarou. She poured enough feelings into her arms to make up for the ten years that she hadn't seen him. And those feelings also served as her new oath.

She would protect Koutarou from solitude, and always warm up his heart.

Just like Koutarou had supported Kiriha and Kii, they would support him. As her best friend and first love became the same person, their two desires became one. Those desires melded into one and became into an even stronger oath.

“I'm sorry. I'll listen to whatever you say today, so please forgive me.”

“Anything?”

Kiriha looked up and smiled at Koutarou as she tilted her head.

“Yeah.”

“I might say something amazing.”

“You won't. That's not the kind of girl you are.”

“…Fufu.”

Kiriha seemed extremely happy as she laughed and entrusted herself to Koutarou once more. She then quietly whispered into his ear.

“Onii-chan, you still haven't answered my previous question. So I want you to properly answer it.”

Was Koutarou happy or not.

Kiriha already knew the answer to that question. That's because when she had met him ten years ago, he had said that he was on his way home. And having a home to return to was a sign of happiness.

But Kiriha wanted to hear Koutarou say it himself. Had she been able to protect him during the ten months they had been together, and had Kii been able to warm his heart the two weeks since they had met? Had Kiriha and Kii been able to support him? She wanted Koutarou to answer her with his own words.

“Now that you mention it, I didn't, did I?”

Koutarou smiled wryly and gathered his thoughts as he looked up into the sky. What meaning had these ten months since he had met Kiriha and these two weeks since he had returned home meant to him? It was a question far too difficult for Koutarou to answer.

“…The owner of this necklace is pretty stupid, you see. He can't even tell who the girl in front of him is. Because of that, he always ended up fighting with those around him.”

Koutarou smiled as she began speaking to Kiriha. His smile and his words were completely different from what he had shown Kiriha up until today. As if he was talking to a small child.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

“But… when he unexpectedly ended up somewhere far away, he strangely enough missed that fighting. So he desperately struggled to return home. So I think… that he's happy. At the very least, I don't think he's feeling lonely.”

Koutarou spoke as if he was talking about someone else. It was a little embarrassing for him to speak as if it was about himself. Even more so when one of the reasons he had returned home was right in front of him.

“…I'm… I'm so glad…”

However, Kiriha didn't seem to care about how Koutarou felt. The moment he had said that he was happy, her chest was filled with emotions and they poured out without stopping. Kiriha didn't know what to do, and so all she could do was cry and embrace Koutarou.

However, there was one thing that she knew.

That was that she no longer needed to worry about if her first love was happy or not, and that she would be able to be of Koutarou's help from now on. She would be able to see his smile up close from now on, and all she needed to do was keep that smile from becoming cloudy.

That made Kiriha shed even more tears of joy and she put more force into the arms around Koutarou.

“But still, to think you were Kii-chan…”

“…You're so slow… geez… couldn't you have noticed half a month ago…”

“I'm sorry.”

Like that, Kiriha continued crying while being held by Koutarou. Since the feelings she had pent up inside of her were huge, she continued doing so for quite a long time. However, Koutarou silently supported her until she stopped.

Part 2

After some time passed and Kiriha had calmed down a little. She slightly separated from Koutarou and looked up at him.

“…Hey, Onii-chan.”

Kiriha whispered and smile.

“Hm?”

“I'm actually a little troubled.”

As Kiriha said that, she put the necklace she had been holding in her hand around Koutarou's neck. To her, that was its rightful place.

Next, after she had shaken her card a few times and showed it to Koutarou she held it against her chest with both arms. That was also its rightful place.

“What's troubling you?”

Kiriha continued crying as she spoke and tears ran down her cheek and fell off her chin, wetting her hands and Koutarou's necklace. Noticing that, Koutarou reached his hand out towards her cheek and wiped her tears away. That made Kiriha happy, and she smiled, and shed one final tear.

“Kiriha and Kii are arguing inside of me. Kiriha wants to trouble you more, while Kii wants to stay like this.”

“Ah, then you don't need to argue.”

Koutarou let out a small sigh and dropped his shoulders.

“Why?”

Kiriha tilted her head like Kii would. She should have had the same face as always, but right now she looked like a young girl.

“…The glances from people around us are stabbing into me. They must think that I'm making you cry.”

By having Kiriha rely on him like Kii, Koutarou was being troubled. In the end, the results were the same, regardless if it was Kiriha or Kii.

“You ARE making me cry, geez…”

After giving Koutarou a very Kiriha-esque mischievous smile, she hugged him like Kii would. The two girls melded into one and threw their feelings at Koutarou.

“Then let's go.”

Koutarou smiled bitterly as he whispered to Kiriha. Strangely enough, he remained calm even as Kiriha was hugging him. As a results of his feelings for Kiriha and Kii merging, he believed this was normal. He was feeling something similar to the way he was feeling towards Sanae.

“Where to?”

Kiriha closed her eyes and whispered back to Koutarou as she continued to hug him.

“We're getting on the roller coaster, obviously. We stand out here…”

The surrounding people staring at them made Koutarou more uneasy than having Kiriha hug him.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

“Trying to get a girl in the mood by taking her on a ride… don't you think you're being a little too simple?”

Kiriha looked up and smiled. She then let go off Koutarou and held his hand. Though she had criticized it as being simple, she seemed very into it. That was of course only obvious, since she had waited for this moment for over ten years.

“I don't. I told you before, didn't I? I'm actually very interested in roller coasters… I just want to ride it myself.”

Koutarou began walking. Kiriha naturally accompanied him and she gently rested her cheek on his shoulder. The two passed through the entrance to the roller coaster as if they were lovers.

“By the way, Onii-chan, who were those words for? Was it Kiriha, or was it Kii?”

“I forgot. Does it even matter?”

“Fufufu. I'll just leave it at that. Koutarou and Onii-chan are both shy.”

“Shut it.”

The winter cold had properly settled in on this February day. The sun was setting and the evening began growing colder. And in the amusement colored orange by the sunlight, the roller coaster zoomed by at full speed.

Nothing special had happened on this day. A boy with an antique necklace and a girl with an old card had just gotten a ride on a roller coaster together.

It was a very normal event on a holiday.

However, it was also an event that dramatically changed the two's relationship.

Roller Coaster at Dusk

Part 3

Midnight on a day past the middle of March. A car stopped in a dim and dark alleyway near the station. A fat man was all alone in that car. He was sitting on the passenger's seat, fast asleep. The driver's seat was empty, and the man was waiting on the person who sat there to come back.

“Zzz… Zzzz… Zzz…”

Like that, the man had been sleeping for about an hour.

And then all of a sudden, the door on the driver's side opened and a slim man jumped in.

“Wake up, Hachi! It's an emergency!”

Despite the slim man shouting, the fat man called Hachi didn't wake up. Hachi continued sleeping and drooled. Panicked, the slim man grabbed a hold of Hachi and violently shook him.

“I told you to wake up! Can't you at least wake up when I'm being serious!”

“Hwah!? A-Aniki…?”

“That's right! Wake up! It's an emergency!”

“Aniki… what happened?”

Hachi rubbed his sleepy eyes and asked the slim man what had happened. The two had been working on a surveillance job for several months, but until now, nothing had happened and the slim man hadn't been this flustered before.

“That girl's condition changed! She's apparently in a critical condition!”

“T-That's terrible!”

The moment that he had heard the words critical condition, Hachi opened his eyes wide and fully woke up. He could now understand the direness of the situation.

“That's why I said it was an emergency! Hachi, you contact Nee-san right away!”

“I'll call her right away! What about you, Aniki!?”

“I'm going back to the hospital! I'll put this spiritual energy stabilizer on her that I got from Nee-san to make sure that she doesn't die! I just hope I'll make it!”

They were the ghost hunters that Koutarou and the others had once fought against. However, they had now given up on their hunting days and had taken up a different job. Their current job was now to regularly report on the condition of a girl committed into a hospital. It was a monotone surveillance job, but it paid well, so the two had worked on without complaining.

“Nee-san! Kiriha-Nee-san! It's me! Hachi!”

Hachi had used his cellphone to call Kiriha.

“Bad news! That girl, Sanae-chan is dying!”

And the two had been watching over a long term hospitalized girl by the name of Higashihongan Sanae.

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, it's the author Takehaya.

With the release of this volume, we have now reached the ten volume mark quite quickly. No, I guess it wasn't quick. It's been three years since the first volume was published. In commemoration of that, I was thinking of telling you how this work came into existence by taking a look back from the first volume and forwards, but since I only have two pages for this afterword I will do so next time if possible. This time I'll just go through what happened in this volume like always.

This story takes place in the past Japan as Koutarou and Clan are on their way back from Forthorthe and it is Koutarou's second secret.

Having reached past Harukaze city in Clan's spaceship, they met with a girl named Kii looking for a shooting star. Koutarou worried that Kii might have seen the spaceship descending, so he tagged along with her to find out, but then the story develops into an unexpected direction.

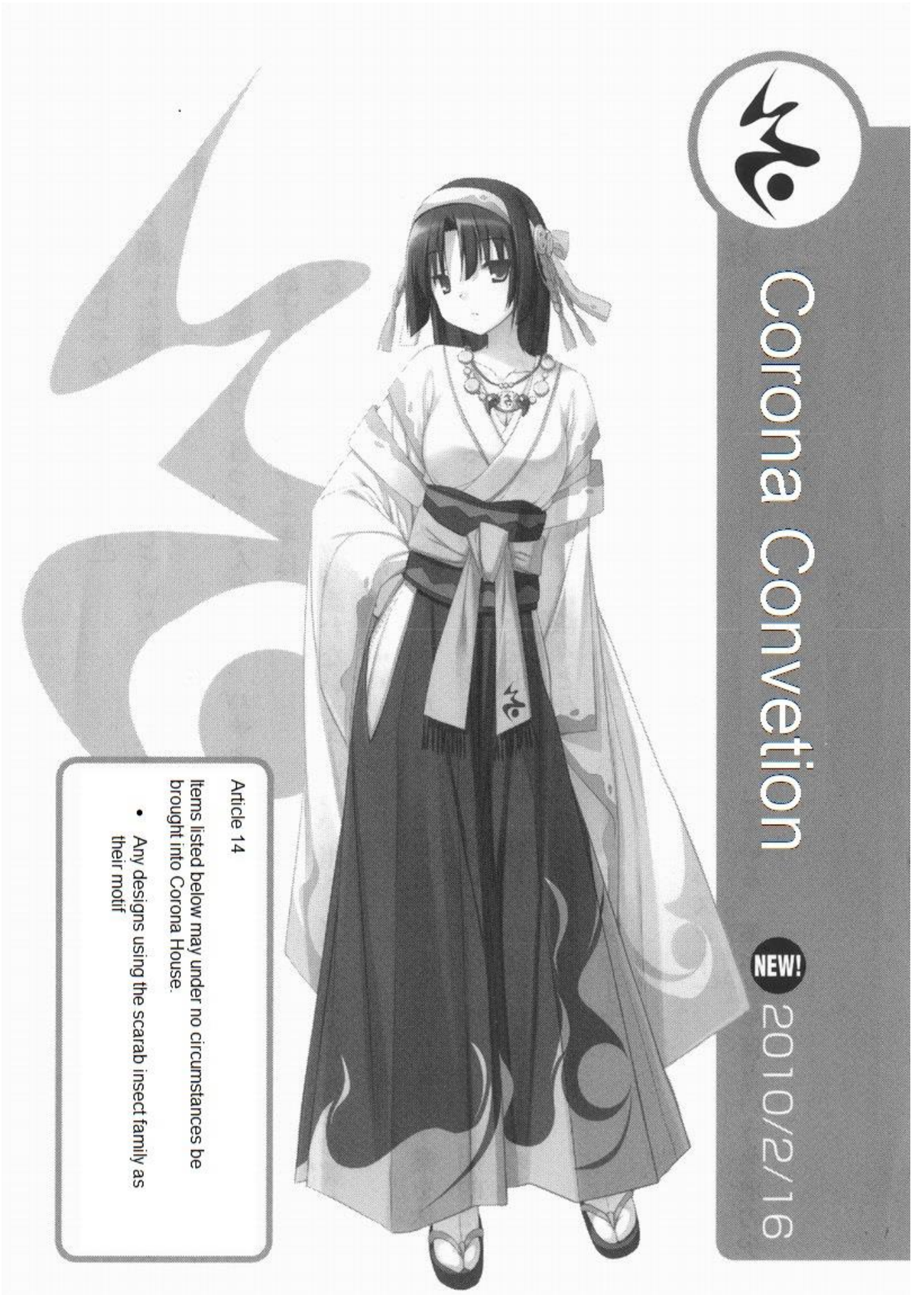
Because of this, the invader girls don't appear. So I was originally thinking of calling this volume 9.5. But compared to the other side stories, it was related to the other invading girls, so I decided to treat it like a proper volume. In other words, it's a very 9.5-esque volume 10.

Whoops, I'm already out of space, so it's about time to say good bye.

As always, I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department, to Poco-san for drawing illustrations for this volume, my group of friends who comes to play whenever I get stuck, R, my friend's son who finally remembered my name and finally everyone who bought this book.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 11.

April, 2012 Takehaya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